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In the second part of his survey, **LARRY E ARNOLD** presents more cases of spontaneous human combustion; these baffling but deadly blazes share a number of puzzling characteristics that may point to more than just the 'human wick' effect at work…

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, PLUCKLEY, PHOTO: GRANT NIXON/ ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

GRANT NIXON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

GHOSTS IN STORIES AND PHOTOS

There's a bit of a spooky feel to this month's proceedings. Our cover story concerns the notorious Kentish village of Pluckley, frequently cited in the press and popular ghost books as "the most haunted village in England". Simon Moreton (who has his own connections to Pluckley) has taken a long, hard look at the most prominent and oft-repeated ghost stories that cling to the village and attempted to trace their origins; and, despite some claims by others over the years, it seems that they largely originated with, or were promulgated by, one Pluckley resident: ghost hunter and memoirist Frederick Sanders. This does not, of course, necessarily invalidate tales of the phantom highwayman, the screaming spectre or the Lady of Rose Cottage, but it does allow us to trace the development and transmission of these particular stories over a number of decades – a fascinating process in its own right. Perhaps any FT readers from the Pluckley area have more recent ghost stories to share – or have the village's ghosts now settled into a pattern of familiar, even comfortable, repetition as long-established bits of local lore?

Meanwhile, Emma Heard brings us a more recent sighting – or, to be precise, a photograph – of what looks a lot like a classic ghostly figure appearing in an unexpected location in the New Forest. Emma enlisted the help of the Forteana Forums to try and identify just what the strange photograph might actually show – and now we await the thoughts of FT readers: so feel free to share your opinions about the 'Stone Ghost Girl of Eyeworth Pond' in the letters pages.

ERRATA

FT457:2: Multiple mix-ups here! In the errata section of FT457, we wrote: "**454:58**: In this issue's Strange Statesmen entry a caption referred to 'the bizarre logo on the Pearsons' car in which they intended to kidnap Essex Senior Coroner Lincoln Brookes'. As Mark Harper wrote in to point out, the would-be kidnappers were actually his namesakes, Shaun and Shiza Harper. We have absolutely no idea who the Pearsons are, so apologies to them too."

We received a follow-up letter from Mark, who pointed out that his name is actually Mark *Pearson* (NOT Harper!!) and that his original letter had been prompted by the inexplicable transformation of the Harpers into the Pearsons in the offending caption. Apologies to Mark, who wrote a further letter pointing out that the erratum also stated that the error occurred on p.58 of FT454, whereas it is in fact on p.48. This head-spinning piling-up of error upon error also prompted Mark to speculate: "Interestingly, as I reread the whole, fascinating, article, I wondered if my surname appeared in the caption under the photo of the bizarre logo of the Harpers because, somehow or other, my writing in about something or other recently had stuck in the caption writer's mind? Not being egotistical here; just trying to view things with a fortean eye!"

Well, we don't know; but as there are no other references to anyone by the name of Pearson in the original article, it is certainly a possible explanation for the otherwise baffling introduction of the mysterious "Pearsons" into this issue's Strange Statesemen.

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ENGLAND ON FIRE

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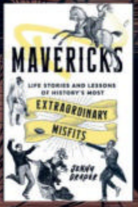

In her first book, popular TikTok historian J Draper uses her characteristic wit and intellect to introduce us to extraordinary figures marginalized by history, and the lessons we can learn from them. Draper's mavericks include Noor Inayat Khan, the courageous secret agent dropped behind enemy lines in World War II; Peter the Wild Boy, a child found living in the woods in Germany who was taken to the English court; La Chevalière d'Eon, a fencing master, spy and diplomat who came out as a woman in 18th-century London; and William Buckland, the man who wrote the first account of a dinosaur yet also ate the heart of a French king.

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

PANIC IN THE STREETS

France's Fête de la Musique falls prey to the latest needle spiking panic

LE PICTORIUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT AND BELOW: France's annual Fête de la Musique saw millions partying in the streets and multiple reports of needle attacks. **BELOW:** Internet prankster Amine Mojito probably didn't help mayyers by posting videos in which he pretended to inject unsuspecting people.

Le Retour De Mojito le Piqueur

Every June, across France, there is a huge street festival, the Fête de la Musique, where towns and cities stage free concerts, parades and dancing, with millions of people taking part. This year, though, the festival, which took place on 21 June, saw the return of the needle spiking panic, with 145 people in several cities reporting being pricked with syringes. A 22-year-old woman, who gave her name as Manon, was on the streets of Bordeaux as the festivities wound up at around 1.30am, when, she says, “Someone tapped my left forearm. I started to feel numb in the muscle, like you do when you get a vaccine. After about 30 minutes, the injection mark appeared.” Although she felt no ill effects, Manon spent several hours at the local hospital being checked over before being sent home to await toxicology results, saying the worry meant she had “barely slept the last few days.”

> *“I started to feel numb in the muscle, like when you get a vaccine”*

LE PICTORIUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

In Paris, 13 needle attacks on women and girls were reported, with several victims hospitalised, and in Angoulême 50 people were believed to have been targeted, while reports of multiple needle stabbings also came from Metz, Tours, Évreux and Rouen. Police detained 12 suspects who they believed may have carried out needle spiking attacks, but none have yet been formally charged. A spokesperson said that the authorities are “taking this very seriously” and although it remains unclear whether date-rape drugs such as Rohypnol or GHB had been injected, “toxicology tests are being done, and the investigation is ongoing”.

Paris police chief Laurent Nuñez said that needle spiking was “completely idiotic”. Many media reports, however, suggested this was a social panic similar to one in 2021. Then, there were more than 1,300 reports of needle spiking in the UK alone, but without a single confirmed case or conviction, a pattern repeated worldwide (see **FT413:4-5, 420:12**).

With the current panic, there seem to have been several priming incidents, mostly on social media. A few days before the Fête, on 17 June, ActuReact, a French news monitoring account run by a high school student, claimed to have “infiltrated” Snapchat groups belonging to people preparing to carry out needle spiking attacks in French cities. He posted a message alleged to be from one of these groups showing a plastic bag from a pharmacy in Perpignan with “I have everything I need to inject on Saturday” scrawled across it. He then shared this with his 120,000 followers on Instagram, describing it as one of sev-

ANIMAL ATTACKS

Cheeky seagulls and possessed sealions

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WALLASEY CATMAN

A new mystery gimp stalks the Wirral

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HIDDEN CHARMS

An apotropaic conference in Cardiff

PAGE 15

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BETTERDAZE
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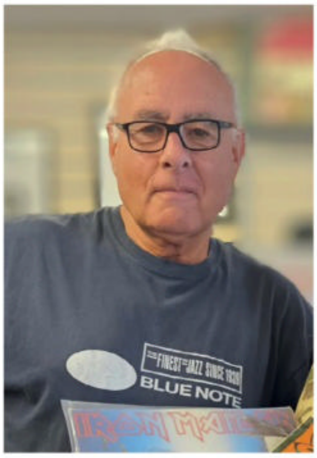
PHOTOS: BETTERDAZE / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: Betterdaze record shop in Northallerton, Yorkshire, where 65-year-old shop owner Gary Lewis (below) was stabbed in the buttock by hyperdermic-wielding nurse Darren Harris, 58, in a seemingly random attack last year.

eral calls to "inject people with syringes during the Fête de la Musique" that he had found. This was reposted to a larger audience on TikTok and Instagram by the popular feminist influencer Abrège Sœur and her posts were then widely reposted, mostly by teenagers, warning people to look out for needle attackers at the Fête. Adding to this already febrile atmosphere was "humorous" Internet prankster Amine Mojito, who, on 20 June, posted a viral video in which he pretended to needle spike unsuspecting people.

As a result, many people attending the Fête believed there was a risk of needle spiking, so it is not surprising that a significant number decided they'd been a victim of it. Commenting on the claims of attacks and the online messages allegedly promoting them, Abrège Sœur said "the objective isn't only to drug women. It's to instil fear in them," adding, "When people start saying that there will be needle attacks, it spreads in the form of rumour — some people mention it in group chats, others pick it up, it just gets amplified, we need to help women feel safer". *thecut.com, theguardian.com, 23 Jun; vice.com, 24 Jun; editions.cnn.com, euronews.com, theweek.com, 25 Jun; lemonade.fr, 27 Jun 2025.*



- Meanwhile in England, a recent case in Yorkshire turned out to be all too real. Gary Lewis, 65, was working at the record shop he owns, Betterdaze in Northallerton, on 2 July last year, when nurse Darren Harris, 58, entered, took out a hypodermic syringe and stabbed Lewis in the buttock, injecting him with a large dose of rocuronium, a powerful muscle relaxant, before walking out again. Lewis followed Harris out of the shop, remonstrating with him, but collapsed on the pavement, where neighbouring shopkeepers came to his assistance and called police and an ambulance. "Apparently, I died on the footpath, my heart stopped on the footpath," said Lewis. "I regained consciousness and they tell me I had a second cardiac arrest in the ambulance." Leaving the shop saved his life; if he had collapsed inside he would have died before anyone found him. Police immediately arrested Harris, who has refused to give a reason for the crime, even in court, where he was sentenced to 16 years in prison for attempted murder. He had travelled all the way from his home in Middlesborough to attack Lewis, who, it seems, was not previously known to him. Lewis is disturbed by the seemingly random nature of the attack, saying, "I do not think it will ever be over and done with unless I am given a reason, and I can't imagine what that reason would be. You rack your brains but you've almost got to not think about it too much, because I may never get an explanation." *BBC News, 11 Apr 2025*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

NAKED CARPENTER 'TRIES TO KILL COP'

D.Star, 5 Dec 2024.

Strip baby penguins of English names, demand Indian Nationalists

D.Telegraph, 5 June 2025.

ROBERT BUSH CHARGED AFTER 35 BODIES FOUND AT FUNERAL HOME IN HULL

Yahoo News, 2 April 2025.

Terrified youngsters run screaming from haunted house then plead to go back in

Irish Times, 31 Oct 2024.

CONFUSION AS GIANT SAUSAGE DISCOVERED AT COVENTRY NIGHTCLUB

CoventryLive, 23 June 2025.

SIDELINES

FLORIDA MAN

As the Florida Highway Patrol tried to pull over a car that Dylan Devereaux, 27, was driving erratically, he took off at high speed, leading to a chase. He managed to dodge the officers, despite stopping to drop off a passenger, but eventually ran off the road and hit a tree. Cops then tasered Devereaux, who was wearing a dalmatian print onesie and was high on methamphetamine, and attempted to handcuff him, but he broke away, still cuffed, and escaped into woods where he managed to elude dog units sent to track him down. He was finally arrested the next morning when police visited his home and found him in. *abcnews4.com, 4 Feb 2025.*

FLORIDA WOMAN

Julissa Negron was briefly visiting her ex-husband in Fort Pierce, Florida, to retrieve her possessions before moving to Connecticut, when the couple got into an argument over his Instagram use. The dispute escalated dramatically and Negron, 50, set about thrashing her ex with a large dildo, causing him to call the police. They arrived to find Negron drunk, naked and incoherent, still swinging the sex toy threateningly, and arrested her for domestic battery. *97x.com, 13 Feb 2025.*

DANGEROUS PLAY

During a recent refurbishment of Scott's Play Park, a children's playground in Wooler, Northumberland, contractors were startled to find two unexploded bombs. Army bomb disposal dealt with these, then they did a full survey of the area and discovered 172 more unexploded 10lb (4.5kg) practice bombs. This is believed to be an abandoned ammunition dump, just beneath the playground surface, created by the Home Guard in WWII, then forgotten about. While small and intended for military manoeuvres, the bombs were still capable of creating serious and life-threatening blasts. *cnn.com, 10 Feb 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

WHEN ANIMALS ATTACK

Gulls, snakes and demonic sealions!

DARREN PARDOE / FACEBOOK

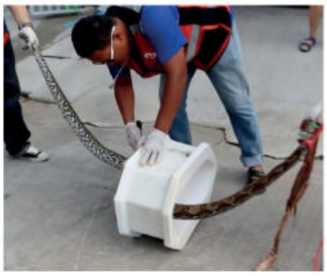
ABOVE: Did this cheeky Cornish gull know that Darren Pardoe had been installing anti-bird spikes when it stole his coffee? **BELOW**: A large python is removed from a toilet after biting off the end of Atthapron Boonmakchuay's penis.

GULL REVENGE

Taking a break from installing anti-bird spikes intended to keep gulls off houses in Porthleven, Cornwall, maintenance worker Darren Pardoe visited a seafront pub for a cup of coffee. Sitting outside, he put his cup down while chatting to another customer, but when he turned round he found a gull drinking his coffee. "I turn round and sure enough a seagull's got its beak in my coffee," said Pardoe. However, before he could take action, the bird made a break for it "next minute the bird picks up the coffee cup by its handle and takes off across the harbour with it," Pardoe explained. "It flew round the harbour and then landed on the water, put the cup down, and the cup just sank." "I think it had remembered me," he added ruefully. *BBC News, 14 Jun 2025.*

TROUSER SNAKE TERROR

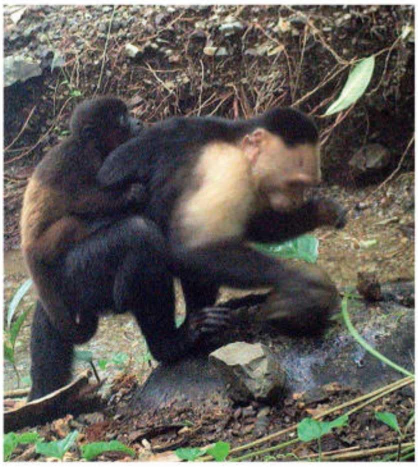
While sitting on the loo in his house in Chachoengsao province, near Bangkok, Thailand, Atthaporn Boonmakchuay, 38, felt a sharp pain in his penis, and reaching down, found that a gigantic python had slithered up the plumbing and had clamped its jaws firmly onto his tackle. In the struggle that ensued, the massive snake bit the end of Boonmakchuay's penis off, but before he collapsed, bleeding copiously, Boonmakchuay managed to tie a rope round the python's head and attach it to the doorknob to stop the creature escaping. Alerted by her husband's screams, Boonmakchuay's wife called emergency services, and he was rushed to hospital and treated for massive blood loss, while the 11-ft (3.4m) python was extracted from the toilet, which had to be smashed with hammers to remove the beast. Unfortunately, it was not possible to retrieve the severed part of Boonmakchuay's member and reattach it, but the snake was wrangled into a bag and released back to the wild. *mirror.co.uk, 29 May 2025.*



A python had slithered up the plumbing and clamped its jaws onto his tackle

CARPECKER

After a spate of vandalism which left more than 20 vehicles with smashed windscreens and broken side mirrors in Rockport, Massachusetts, local Janelle Favaloro finally nailed the culprit, saying "I'm describing him as 18 to 24 inches tall, wearing black and white with a red hat" – a crow-sized pileated woodpecker. "The woodpecker showed up and landed on the windshield wipers of the RV in our yard and was looking at its reflection. And we were like, 'You know what, I bet he was the one that damaged the mirrors, as well'," said Favaloro. Commenting on the bird's actions Ron Magill, from Zoo Miami, said "This time of year is breeding season, so all these male birds are getting into a very aggressive territorial courtship display," continuing, "If they're seeing



ABOVE LEFT: RJ LaMendola recovers in a California hospital after being attacked by a "possessed, feral, demonic" sealion. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A white-faced capuchin monkey, dubbed 'Joker', was filmed carrying off numerous baby howler monkeys.

their reflections of themselves, they don't understand it's a reflection, they think it's a competitor." While many birds will behave in this way, most do not have a woodpecker's hammer-blow peck, so do not smash the reflective surfaces they attack.

Closer to home, in Nottinghamshire, mating season supercharged the aggression of local crows. Jane Phillips, 74, was walking along a footpath in Stapleford when she felt a blow to her head. Initially, she thought a ball from a nearby school had struck her, but, she said: "I put my hand up to my head and it was absolutely covered with blood. Then I saw the crows flying around me." Phillips took herself to the Ilkeston walk-in centre, where staff were horrified that her wound was from a crow attack. There was a lot of blood, because even small head wounds bleed a lot. "I think it was just one crow, and when I was seen by a nurse, they thought it was a claw rather than a beak," said Phillips, adding, "I couldn't believe it. People kept saying to me 'You fought with a crow and the crow won'." *nbcnews.com, 24 Apr; itv.com/news, 9 Jun 2025.*

MONKEYNAPPERS

Reviewing camera trap footage as part of her research into capuchin monkeys on Jicarón Island, 55km (34 miles) off the coast of Panama, behavioural ecologist Zoë Goldsborough spotted something that seemed "off". It appeared to be just a young adult male capuchin carrying a baby, but the coloration gave Goldsborough pause, and on closer inspection she realised that the baby belonged to a different species; it was a howler monkey.

"I realised that it was really something that we hadn't seen before," Goldsborough said. "I was shocked". Going back through 15 months of footage, Goldsborough and colleagues saw the same monkey, a white-faced capuchin nicknamed "Joker" for the scar on his mouth, toting several different howler babies. They then spotted other males doing the same thing and realised that between January 2022 and March 2023, Joker and four subadult and juvenile male capuchins had abducted at least 11 infant howler monkeys. The capuchins showed no sign of taking an interest in the babies once they had them, though; they were just carrying them about, with no clear benefit to themselves, until the infants eventually died of starvation. However, there was no sign that they were eating them either.

Scientists suspect the kidnapping behaviour is a "cultural fad", much like orcas wearing salmon on their heads (see **FT455:6-7**). Goldsborough's colleague Brendan Barrett described capuchins as "destructive, explorative agents of chaos", that will "rip things apart, hit wasp nests, wrestle with each other, harass other species and poke around just to see what happens", and in the conditions on the island, where there are no humans and nothing that predates monkeys, "that makes it less risky to do stupid things". He suspects the capuchins are attacking the endangered howlers and stealing their infants out of boredom and hopes that either they will tire of the game or the howlers will wise up and be on guard for capuchin incursions. *editions.cnn.com, 19 May 2025.*

"POSSESSED" SEALIONS

Toxins from an algal bloom off the coast of Southern California have had a dramatic effect on the local sealion population. RJ LaMendola had been surfing there for 20 years without incident until he attracted the attentions of a poisoned sealion in March. "It looked possessed, feral, almost demonic," said LaMendola, as it lunged at him, bit him and dragged him off his board. Just south of where LaMendola was attacked, 15-year-old Phoebe Beltran was swimming off Long Beach when she, too, was repeatedly bitten by a sealion. "I was just so scared, so shocked, but I still felt the immense pain on my arms, like, over and over again," she said. Both sealions had been poisoned by toxic algæ. This produces domoic acid, which builds up in smaller fish like sardines and anchovies, and when these are eaten in large quantities by the sealions, it causes sickness. John Warner, CEO of the Marine Mammal Care Center in Los Angeles, said sealions aren't "naturally aggressive" and don't "actually attack people". The domoic acid causes serious neurological problems for the sealions including seizures, disorientation and a tell-tale head-tilting behaviour known as "stargazing". Warner explained that the animals are "disoriented and most likely most of them are having seizures, and so their senses are not all fully functional as they normally would be and they're acting out of fear," and warned beachgoers to keep away from sealions. His organisation treats sick sealions, and with proper care, 50 to 60 per cent survive. *BBC News, 9 Apr 2025.*

SIDELINES

DIRTY MONEY

In China a brisk trade has grown up selling "bank soil" – literally soil from potted plants in banks, or from the grounds outside them. A small bag can cost as much as 888 yuan (£95), and sellers claim that the "soil is manually collected from the five major banks and is believed to enhance wealth and dissolve bad energy". Some provide proof of origin for their soil by posting videos of it being collected from outside a bank and maintain it provides a "999.999% success rate in generating wealth". *scmp.com, 7 Mar 2025.*

PET DEMON

A 30 year old former boxer named Chen has been evicted from two apartments in Foshan, China, because of his pet – a black buffalo calf he named "Bull Demon King" after a character in the Buddhist epic *Journey to the West.* Chen's social media posts show him cleaning and feeding the calf, dressing it up and taking it for walks. Chen admits it is hard keeping Bull Demon King as he needs to clean and disinfect his home frequently, but denies it is a social media stunt saying: "If you love it, you will tolerate everything about it." *nevsedoma.com.ua, 4 Apr 2025.*

BABY WIPE

A 25-year-old Texas man is facing potential child abuse charges after a TikTok video went viral showing him using a three month old baby as a snow removal tool. In the clip he can be seen holding the child with both hands and using it to scrape snow off the windscreen of his Hyundai Elantra like a human squeegee. *D.Mirror, 1 Feb 2025.*

UNFAIRY PORN

Academics have complained that the current trend for "fairy porn" novels that blend steamy romance and high fantasy are "patronising toward Wales". They complain that the books mine the culture and language to make "their fantasy sound more mystical, magical and made up" without any understanding of the country, often borrowing impressive sounding words, using them out of context, and mangling their pronunciation. "That's not all Wales is," says Professor Dimitra Fimi, a lecturer in fantasy literature at the University of Glasgow. *D.Telegraph, 6 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

MAN MONSTER

Confronted with a child who refused to go to sleep because of "a monster under the bed", a babysitter in Great Bend, Kansas, decided to show that there was nothing to be afraid of. However, when she looked under the bed, she came face to face with a man hiding there – Martin Villalobos Jr., 27, a former resident of the property who was supposed to stay away under a protection-from-abuse order. The babysitter confronted him, and there was an altercation during which the child was knocked over, resulting in Villalobos being arrested for aggravated burglary, aggravated battery, child endangerment and obstructing a police officer. *BBC News, 27 Mar 2025*

FOGGY NOTION

On 25 February, The National Coastwatch Institution issued a statement saying that residents of Land's End in Cornwall "may have noticed that, for the past six days, the Longships Lighthouse had been sounding its foghorn every 13 seconds… all day and all night," adding that "our watchkeeper has reported this 'interesting' occurrence to HM Coastguard." It seems the problem was in the automated fog sensing system, but not only were they having to wait for parts, they then needed to wait for calm weather to be able to reach the lighthouse. The fault was eventually fixed on 4 March. *Guardian 1 Mar 2025.*

MIDWIFE GHOST PIG

The cast of popular TV series *Call the Midwife* believe the Victorian manor in Surrey where some of the filming takes place is haunted. Actor Rebecca Gethings says "Our medic heard a bang… she went running in and took a photo in the dark and when you zoom in there is a figure of an Edwardian lady holding a pig." *D.Star, 29 Jan 2025*

MARTIN ROSS

DON'T PANIC!

Hyper-realistic dolls spark unrest in Brazil while French accused of purloining African penises

PHOTOS: ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE & BELOW: A group of Brazilian women gather in a Sao Paulo park to bond and show off their hyper-realistic reborn baby dolls. **FACING PAGE**: Reborn baby dolls for sale lie in an incubator at a store in Campinas, Brazil.

THE REBORN DOLL CRAZE

On social media in Brazil there has been a huge uproar about the threat to society presented by women doting on hyper-realistic baby dolls, known as "reborn dolls". This has prompted plotlines in popular soaps and over 30 laws being introduced in legislatures across the country intended to prevent the dolls receiving public healthcare or being used to claim priority for public services. Videos showing collectors caring for their dolls have received ridicule and abuse and a hit rap song encouraged people to kick the dolls in the street.

"I'm receiving daily threats through social media," said doll collector Larissa Vedolin, 25. "I get messages from anonymous accounts saying things like: 'I can't wait to get a gun and find you on the street'." The opprobrium aimed at dolls and their owners has reached such a fever pitch that a man was arrested for slapping a four-month-old baby, having mistaken it for a reborn doll.

The Brazilian reborn doll panic seems to have been prompted by a collector complaining that

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

she had been called "crazy" for taking one of her dolls to a shopping centre. This led to a video allegedly showing a doll receiving "treatment" in hospital going viral and attracting much outrage. Despite the collector responsible explaining this was "roleplay" and did not involve a real hospital, rumours spread that medics across Brazil were being significantly inconvenienced by reborn doll owners taking them to emergency departments and insisting they be given health care, leading to the wave of legislation. In fact, investigation revealed only one case of a reborn doll being taken to a hospital, by someone experiencing a psychiatric disorder.

"I can't recall any other issue that, in such a short period, managed to spark so many bills across different levels of government like this," said Brazilian political scientist Isabela Kalil. Kalil thinks she understands what lies behind the reborn doll panic, laying it at the door of Brazil's far-right, saying "If a topic is trending, these politicians will propose laws about it even if they make no sense." Kalil believes it is happening now because the far-right former president, Jair Bolsonaro, is on trial for an attempted coup, and if his supporters create a media panic about doll collectors, the trial gets pushed out of the headlines, a strategy that US far-right political manipulator Steve Bannon describes as "flooding the zone with shit".

Doll owners, though, say they have received ridicule from across the political spectrum. "Adult men can collect action figures or play video games without raising eyebrows. But adult women are not allowed the luxury of entertainment," Kalil complained. *theguardian.com, 22 Jun 2025; apnews.com, 30 May 2025.*

The stolen penises would be flown by military aircraft to France

MACRON: PENIS THIEF?

While penis theft panics have been endemic in west Africa, particularly Nigeria, since at least the 1970s, they are relatively new to the Central African Republic (CAR), where claims that people have been stealing men's genitals by magic, usually after a handshake, have only been made since around 2010. Most recently, in July 2024, an aid worker in Bambari narrowly escaped lynching after three youths accused him of thieving their genitals, while in August, in the capital Bangui, a man had to be rescued by the local chief after being surrounded by an angry mob who accused him of stealing a someone's penis by brushing against them.

Shortly afterwards, a Malian website, bamada.net, published an article insinuating that penis theft in CAR was being orchestrated by the French to restore the failing virility of their men, naming a diplomat in CAR as orchestrator of the scheme, and alleging it had been authorised personally by President Macron. The article claimed the French were using "secret nanotechnologies to steal the masculine attributes of African men in order to compensate for the declining demographics of Europeans". Allegedly, French scientists had discovered that the male sex hormone "could be obtained from another man's private parts" with the highest levels of testosterone being found in "African men", especially in the Central African Republic, so Macron had set up a scheme, codenamed "Repopulation", to "extract this hormone from black men" by stealing their penises. The stolen penises would be flown by military aircraft to France and "hidden in one of the secret bunkers in Versailles" where they could have precious bodily fluids extracted to revitalise French masculinity.

While both Mali and the CAR have long been within the French sphere of influence in Africa, recently Russia has been gaining power in the region; with CAR in the process of drafting a law against "foreign agents" based on the Russian model, it was suspiciously timely to have the French accused of the emotive crime of penis theft. Investigations into the article revealed that the author, Steve Fleitz, did not appear to exist and that the piece seemed to have come from sources notorious for pushing Russian propaganda in the region. As a result, it is likely to have been an imaginative attempt by the Russians to discredit France in its former African "backyard". However, the article did not achieve its aim; even in countries where penis theft by witchcraft is taken as fact, the idea that the French might be behind it was met with widespread ridicule and the rumour failed to take off. *booksandideas.net, 10 Jun 2025.*

For other recent penis-stealing panics, see **FT438:4-5, 439:5.**

BELOW: Emmanuel Macron has been blamed for many things, but masterminding a plan to steal the penises of African men might be an accusation too far.

SIDELINES...

ABUSE CASE

Police in Bloomington, Indiana, arrested Ashley Gibson, 29, for child endangerment and fare dodging after she was spotted taking a small child out of a suitcase that she had carried onto a bus shortly after boarding at South Curry Pike. Taken in by police, she claimed she had put the two-year-old in the case "to keep her warm" and that "her family caseworker told her it was OK." *indianapublicmedia.org, 17 Jan 2025.*

DUCK EXPLODES

Four days after Storm Eowyn wreaked havoc across Scotland, residents of Dennistoun in Glasgow were surprised to wake up and find what looked like snow covering the neighbourhood. On closer inspection this turned out to be tiny polystyrene balls. The storm had seriously damaged an enormous inflatable duck that was advertising Connies Big Duck Bathrooms, a local company noted for its wacky promotions, and it had finally burst, blasting the polystyrene it contained across the district. Not everyone saw the funny side; one local said. "This stuff is everywhere. Hopefully they take some accountability and clear the mess." *dailyrecord.co.uk, 28 Jan 2025.*

FOOLING NO ONE

In what seems to be becoming a national tradition, the Quinhu Bay Forest Animal Kingdom in China has been trying to pass off inventively dyed Chow Chow dogs as exotic animals. Previously, both Taizhou Zoo and a zoo in Shanwei had attempted to fool visitors with dyed dogs labelled as pandas (**FT448:7**), but Quinhu had dyed theirs orange with black stripes and were claiming they were tiger cubs. Also, in Russia, street scammers have taken to offering tourists photo opportunities with dyed dog "panda cubs". *Sun, 31 Jan 2025.*

EYE BENDING

Bend, Oregon, has been experiencing a plague of people putting googly eyes on the public sculptures situated on the city's roundabouts. At least eight installations have been augmented with large comedy eyes, but city authorities are not impressed, saying, "While we don't condone the wreaths, leis and Santa hats, let's stay away from adhesives, graffiti and all things that can damage the art." *abcnews4.com, 15 Dec 2024.*

SIDELINES...

WITCH ATTACK

German politician Alexander Kebeck says he was returning from the carnival in his hometown of Lossburg when he was ambushed by six people wearing the traditional costume of the Heimbach-Hexa. This is a local association of carnival witches, who dress in hoods, leather aprons, dark stockings and Devil masks and whose origins date back to 1488. The witches "jumped from behind and hit me in the back, brutally knocking me to the ground," he alleges, claiming that six of them then set about him, kicking him and breaking his ribs. The Heimbach-Hexa deny involvement and are supporting the police investigation. *D.Telegraph, 18 Jan 2025*

CLEVER CROCS

Crocodiles in Borneo have been filmed thrashing about in the water in a way that seems to imitate the flailing of a drowning person. From a distance, the front leg of a crocodile waving from the water can look deceptively human, and it is suspected that their behaviour could be aimed at luring "rescuers" into the water for the crocs to prey on. *D.Star, 11 Jan 2025.*

POOP AND RUN

Deepak, a 27-year-old phone thief from Delhi, India, developed a novel escape strategy: he trained himself to defecate at will. If police closed in on him, he would soil himself, producing a foul stench that made the cops recoil, allowing him to make a run for it. So successful was this ruse that he gained the nickname the "Poop and Run Bandit". However, his odorous reign came to an end when he was pounced on by specially prepared police. "As expected, Deepak deployed his infamous 'filth plan' but the officers, equipped with gloves and masks, thwarted his last-ditch effort and took him into custody," said a police spokesperson. *indiatoday.in, 25 Mar 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

CATMAN AND DOGBOY

Another mystery gimp and a Thai feral child

ABOVE LEFT: The Wirral's cat-suited night stalker captured on camera. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Police and social workers in Lap Lae District, Thailand, investigate the home where an eight-year-old boy was allegedly being raised by dogs.

In Wallasey, in the Wirral, sightings reminiscent of the "Somerset Gimp" (**FT384:24, 391:18, 393:22, 428:26, 433:9, 435:25, 439:23**) have been taking place. A man dressed in a costume that makes him resemble a black panther has been filmed wriggling under fences and writhing on the ground, meowing, near the Derby Pool Harvester pub in the town. He has also been spotted making "growling" noises at people on a nearby beach and there are reports that he had "jumped out from behind gravestones at Earlston Cemetery". Locals described the mysterious character as an "urban jaguar", "banshee", and a "gimp", and said he wears a dark figure-hugging suit and a cat mask. While walking her dog, Abbie Gilbert "heard a man making cat noises", and shone her torch in the direction of the sound to find a cat-suited man "waving his arms at me before crawling up the hill".

"I didn't really find him to be a threat," she said, "just a bit bizarre. He didn't approach me, he just made some weird poses and then scarpered," adding "I see strange things on the Wirral all the time so it wasn't too much of a shock." Another dog walker said "He's probably not all right. Maybe the police need to check on him," while a third took a less charitable view, saying, "I've never seen a fellow dressed as a cat. But if I did I'd set the dog on him." Merseyside Police said they had received no reports of the Wirral Cat Man and were not investigating, saying that "as far as we are aware no crime has been committed". *metro.co.uk, 4 Jul; telegraph.co.uk, 5 Jul 2025.*

> *Locals described the mysterious character as an "urban jaguar"*

- Authorities in Thailand discovered an eight-year-old-boy being raised by dogs when they made a welfare visit to the semi-derelict shack where his mother, 46, and brother, 23, lived in Lap Lae District, Uttaradit Province. The boy, who has not been named, lived outside with six dogs, moved about on all fours, and could only communicate by barking. "He didn't speak; he just barked. It was pitiful to see," said Paveena Hongsakul, a social worker who took part in the rescue effort with local police. When younger, the boy had attended pre-school, but only attended primary school once, going with his mother to receive a stipend of around 400 baht (£9) for his schooling. "His mother hasn't allowed him to go to school since he received a subsidy for free education," Hongsakul said. "After getting the money, she simply kept him at home." The shack was described as "drug-infested" and both the boy's mother and brother tested positive for drugs. The mother allegedly frequently begged for food and money at local temples, and the family were known as addicts. They were shunned by neighbours, who had forbidden their children from playing with the boy due to his mother's behaviour. One rescuer said, "The house is in a red zone for drugs. The boy had no one, just the dogs to play with." Hongsakul believed the boy had been found before he had suffered permanent damage from his ordeal, saying, "The boy will be given a chance at a good life. We'll follow up with him to make sure he gets everything he needs," and was intending to place him in a local children's home. The boy's mother and brother have been charged with drug offences and child neglect. *dailymail.co.uk, 4 Jul; metro.co.uk, 5 Jul 2025.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

313: AVANT-GARDENING

An anonymous online statement about Fort reads thus: "While he didn't specifically focus on horticulture, his work, particularly in books like *The Book of the Damned* often touched upon unusual natural occurrences that might be indirectly related to botany or agriculture."

No Comment. Readers' views welcome.

This column is dedicated equally to Percy Thrower (older FT readers will recognise him) and our own horticultural guru Mat Coward (see his book *Eat Your Front Garden* and columns in the *Morning Star*).

Mat seems to draw a firm distinction between flower and vegetable gardens, leaning heavily to the latter. In this, he is being quite classical. There is great emphasis in the sources on garden produce. Commenting on the paucity of references to Greek gardens, William Smith (*A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 1875, available online) could only find one lonely mention of flower gardens, in Aristophanes' *Birds*, v1056. Still, there was a big three-day festival, *Anthesteria*, named for them, and many people must have cultivated and sold blooms to meet the enormous permanent demand for (e.g.) garlands and wreaths.

Greek word for Flower is 'Anthos", from which derive 'Anthology' and such blooms as Chrysants.

Despite its age Smith's book remains the handiest collection of Græco-Roman sources. For one side of the subject see Sara K Myers, *Ancient Roman Literary Gardens* (2025) and *Gardens of the Roman Empire* (2017, multiple editors, extracts available online).

"The Book of Life begins with a man and woman in a garden. It ends with Revelations." – Oscar Wilde.

Punchline rests upon the nudity of Adam and Eve. I say more about this in another column dealing with the history of Apples (not actually mentioned as such in biblical texts, being interlopers from English translations). The Greek word (deriving from Persian) 'Paradeisos' came to be associated with the Garden of Eden, hence our vision of 'Paradise' – further reference-point is the *Star Trek* episode 'The Way to Eden', featuring Mr Spock in musical mode.

Those who regard Adam/Eve/Eden as fictions may see a loose comparison in Greek mythology, namely The Gardens of the Hesperides, located (many think) in the West, possibly near the Atlas Mountains. These were sacred to the goddess Hera, tended by nymphs, guarded by a hundred-headed dragon, and filled with apple trees. I suppose these latter may have influenced the aforementioned biblical translators to import this fruit to Eden.

There is, of course, another important biblical garden: Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, where Jesus was arrested; "his sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22.44). Obviously a place of great significance to pious Christians. Some of the resident olive trees have been estimated as being 900 years old.

For Athenian gardens see the handy booklet produced by the American School of Classical Studies, extracted online by the Wikipedia entry. The place abounded in them, religious and secular, both in the city centre and outlying districts. Both public and private ones are attested. Most notable are the rustic settings for the schools of Plato (Academy) and Aristotle (Lyceum), surpassed in this regard by Epicurus, whose teachings were known as 'The Garden Philosophy'. A modern parallel of sorts may be found in Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, leading centre for Byzantine (and Pre-Columbian) studies, famous for both its scholars and its gardens, musically celebrated by Stravinsky.

The Romans had a slogan: *Rus in Urbe* – The Country in the City. According to Pliny (*Natural History*, bk19 ch19 paras50-3), the kings of Rome introduced gardening to the city. Allotments by all accounts: Pliny defines them as the Poor Man's Farm, contrasting with the ever more luxurious ones owned by the rich.

In the first century BC, two Romans were famous for their gardens, the retired general Lucullus and the historian Sallust. Lucullus's eastern campaigns had introduced him to the Persian style of horticulture. His vast holdings, both in Rome and elsewhere in Italy, are described in mocking detail by both Pliny and Plutarch. It is notable that these authors concentrate on the buildings rather than what they grew. Not surprisingly, both sets in Rome drifted into imperial possessions.

Might be the moment to mention that Pliny the Younger (nephew) is credited with having the first-known lawn in horticultural history by George Drower, *A History of Gardening in 50 Objects* (2021) – relevant extract with photo available online.

"You can lead a whore to culture but you cannot make her think" – Dorothy Parker. Since Messalina (Claudius's third wife and empress) was (if you believe Juvenal and Pliny) Rome's most glittering nymphomaniac, Tacitus (*Annals*, bk11 ch1) may be said to have anticipated the divine Dorothy by saying how much she lusted after Lucullus's gardens (where she would soon be murdered by soldiers).

Tacitus (*Annals*, bk15 ch45) dubs Nero "A seeker after the Incredible". Never was this more evident than in the landscaping of his 'Golden House' palace, begun after the Great Fire of AD 64. Not for him mere gazebos, ha-has, sheds. Instead (e.g.) a pond the size of a lake, shaded walkways a mile long, and for good measure a well-stocked safari park – full details in Suetonius's biography (ch31), plus there's a virtual tour on the Star of Nature website.

Poems about gardens were written by Virgil and the first-century AD Spanish-born Columella. The latter provides a fair share of the twaddling folklore indulged in by the Elder Pliny (see here Jerry Stannard's online article in *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 4, 1982, 3-23, plus Michael Dusuisen's online list of bizarre remedies). Perhaps the gem is his advice to have menstruating women toddle three times around the garden to rid it of caterpillars. During their periods, women were a valuable ancillary: they could drive away hail and whirlwinds, also storms at sea. For the full powers of menstruating women, see Sophie Chavarria's article on the *Cahiers Mondes Ancient* website. Perhaps Mat should erect a statue of Priapus in his garden. This deity was a kind of Worzel Gummidge, a name I recall was once applied to Michael Foot for his scruffy appearance at the Cenotaph.

There's a collection of curse poems (*Priapea*) spelling out the divine penalties for apple-scrumpers and the like. A typical one reads:

'Watch Out I don't catch you! I'll not use my stick,
Nor will my curved sickle you savagely prick.
But when I thrust up you my great thick pole,
Stretched without wrinkle will be your arsehole.'

So, we may conclude:
A God up the anus
Will surely pain us….

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING presents a round-up of numismatic discoveries from the British Isles and beyond

A HORDE OF HOARDS!

A hoard of British coins bearing the inscription of King Cunobelin and found in a Dutch field in October 2023 have been identified as very likely to be the spoils of war of a Roman soldier from the conquest of Britain. The 44 gold coins, known as staters, were discovered alongside 360 Roman coins, in a field in Bunnik, near Utrecht. The coins are believed to have been given as military pay. The staters bear the name of the British Celtic king also known as Cunobelinus, immortalised by Shakespeare as Cymbeline in the play of that name, who reigned between AD 5 and AD 40 in the south-east of Britain. Analysis of what is the first mixed composition collection found on mainland Europe suggests the coins were deliberately buried in a shallow pit and stored in a cloth or leather pouch.

The coins, which were found less than 30cm (11in) below the surface of the soil, are said to amount to what would have been 11 years in wages for an ordinary Roman soldier. Four of the British staters are regarded as posthumous issues, probably struck by Cunobelinus's successors as ruler of the Catuvellauni tribe, the brothers Togodumnus and Caratacus, at approximately AD 43. The wide chronological range of the coins suggests they were not selected based on quality, gold content or weight, but removed from circulation in a single event, consistent with being spoils from the early Roman conquest of Britain under the general Aulus Plautius (AD 43-47).

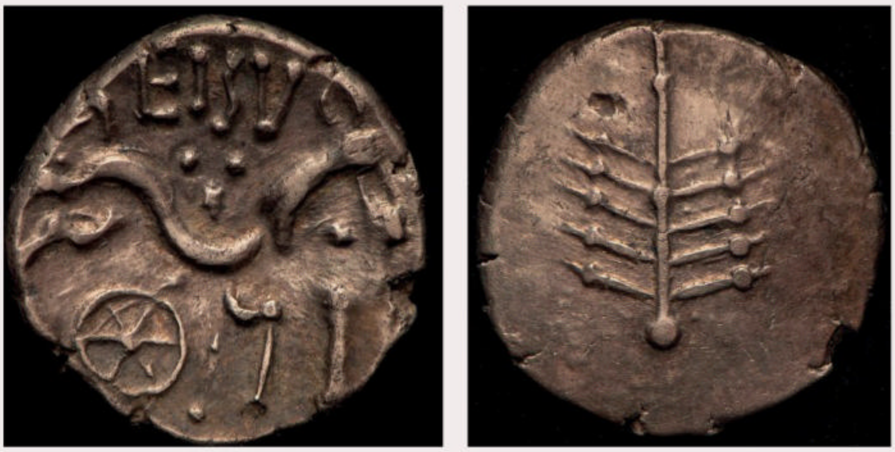
The coins may have been distributed as a donativum, a monetary gift often given to soldiers in the Roman army as a reward after a successful campaign. Of the Roman coins, 72 are gold aurei, a high value currency, and 288 are silver denarii. They date from approximately 200 BC to AD 47. The most recent coins in the hoard, struck in AD 46-47, bear the portrait of the emperor Claudius. The identical marks of those coins suggest they were minted as part of a single batch. Among the silver pieces are Roman coins from the time of Julius Cæsar, and one features Juba, the king of Numidia in north-west Africa – present-day Algeria.

Anton Cruysheer, from the Utrecht Landscape and Heritage Foundation, said: "This is the first time that physical evidence of the return of the troops has been found. Apparently they came back with all sorts of things. That is new information."

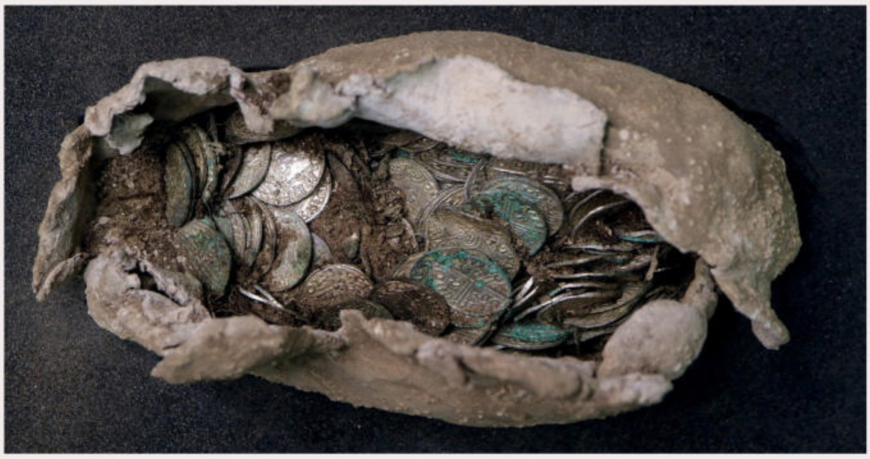
Britain consisted of several separate kingdoms before Claudius ordered Aulus Plautius to invade with a force of four legions reinforced by a further 20,000 auxiliary soldiers. Caratacus and Togodumnus had

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES (RMO)

MUSEUMS WORCESTERSHIRE


MUSEUMS WORCESTERSHIRE

TOP: The Bunnik hoard of more than 400 British coins. **ABOVE**: The Worcester hoard, the largest collection of coins dating to the reign of Emperor Nero ever found. Among the silver denarii was a single Iron Age gold stater minted for a local British tribe, the Dobunni (shown above).



OXFORD COTSWOLD ARCHAEOLOGY

LEFT: The cloth package of 321 11th century silver coins found at the Sizewell C site in Suffolk. **BELOW**: The tiny coin believed to be the oldest Anglo Saxon example from East Anglia. **BOTTOM**: The Cappercleuch hoard.

been leading attacks on the Atrebates tribe, who had political and trading links with the Romans, extending the area of influence of the anti-Roman Catuvellauni further westwards from their homelands north of the River Thames. *Guardian, 27 Jan 2025.*

- A hoard of gold and silver Roman coins dating back to the reign of Emperor Nero was found during building works in the Leigh and Bransford area, west of Worcester, in late 2023. The treasure, consisting of 1,368 Iron Age and Roman coins, includes the largest collection from the emperor's reign ever found. Most of the coins are silver denarii, minted in Rome and dating from the time of the Roman Republic in 157 BC up to Nero's reign between AD 54–68. The sole gold coin is an Iron Age stater, which was minted for the local British tribe, the Dobunni, who were in the area now known as Worcestershire and neighbouring counties to the south and west in AD 20–45. One expert theory is that the hoard represents the savings of a wealthy local farmer, who made his money by supplying the Roman army with grain and livestock.

The hoard is the third to have been found in the area in the past 25 years. In 1999, 434 silver coins and 38 shards of pottery were found near Chaddesley Corbett. In a much larger find, two detectorists from Redditch found a clay pot full of 3,784 coins on Bredon Hill in 2011. *BBC News, 2 Dec 2024.*

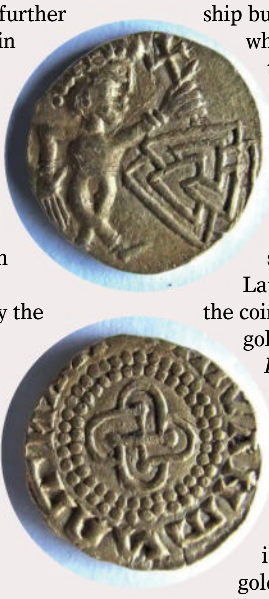
- A cloth package containing 321 silver coins in mint condition dating back to the 11th century has been found during excavations at the site of future nuclear power station Sizewell C on the Suffolk coast. The team believed the bundle of coins could have been the savings pot of a local figure, fearing regime changes following the coronation of Edward the Confessor in 1042.

The coins date between 1036 and 1044 during the reigns of Harold I, Harthacnut and Edward the Confessor. A large number of them were minted in London, but others were struck at locations including Thetford and Norwich in Norfolk, as well as more locally in Ipswich and further away in Lincoln and Stamford in Lincolnshire.

The archæologists said the coins represented a substantial amount of money to most people of the time and likely belonged to someone of middle status rather than anyone of very high status or national importance. However, they do not know why the collection was never retrieved. It was likely the owner was prevented from returning to the location – they may have died before they could return or were unable to relocate the exact spot where they buried the coins, it was theorised. *BBC News, 7 Jan 2025.*

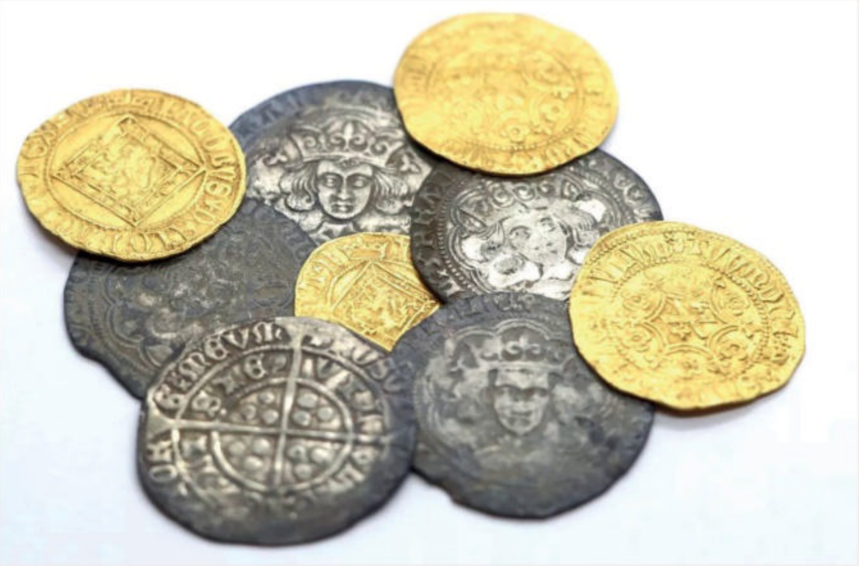
- A tiny gold coin, struck in the seventh century and no bigger than a fingernail, believed to be the oldest from the Anglo-Saxons in East Anglia, was found in a field near Norwich last autumn. The design depicts a man dancing a jig while holding a Christian cross above a *valknut*, a pagan design of three interlocked triangles which experts associate with the god Odin, whose roles in Norse mythology included ferrying the dead to the afterlife. Similar emblems have been seen on Anglo-Saxon cremation urns.

Coin expert Dr Adrian Marsden, from the Norfolk Historic Environment Service, said all the evidence pointed to it being "the earliest Anglo-Saxon East Anglian coin so far known", dating it to AD 640 to 660, around the time of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. It was struck at a time when pagan beliefs were starting to give way to Christianity, and its design appears to straddle this time of change. On the reverse of the coin is a design that could be a cross or could be a swastika, then recognised as a good luck symbol, surrounded by an attempt at a Latin inscription. Testing revealed the coin was made from a very high gold content, of up to 60 per cent. *BBC News, 8 June 2024.*



DR ADRIAN MARSDEN

- Two metal detectorists have unearthed a hoard of 15th century coins in the Scottish Borders in close proximity in the Cappercleuch area which is near St Mary's Loch. The 30 gold and silver coins are a mix of Scottish and English coins, comprising English silver groats minted during the period from the reign of Henry V (1413-1422) to that of Edward IV (1461-1483), and Scottish gold demy and half-demys of James I (1406-1437) and James II (1437-1460). *BBC News, 19 Feb 2025.*



CROWN OFFICE

AI: Science, magic or religion?

DAVID HAMBLING asks if AI is really about to attain superintelligence – and how would we know?

As Noel Rooney recounted recently (**FT458:42-44**, **459:44-47**), there is something resembling a religious cult around Artificial Intelligence research in California, with a needlessly messianic take on the concept of the Singularity. But there is a deeper question here about how much science there is to so-called AI.

'So-called' because of its central claim that, unlike other types of computing, AI involves something akin to human intelligence. This is problematic because there is no agreement over what human intelligence actually is (see **FT411:14**). Basing a field on replicating something undefinable sounds as fanciful as angelology.

On the other hand, Moore's Law, stating roughly that computing power doubles every couple of years, was also unprovable and lacked scientific backing. Belief in Moore's Law successfully drove the computing industry for decades; but that does not make it scientific.

AI researchers generally sidestep the definition issue. Back in 1950, the mathematician, philosopher and sometime codebreaker Alan Turing suggested a neat practical workaround. A machine could fairly be described as intelligent if you could not distinguish it from a person in conversation. Rather than endlessly debating terms like 'sentient' or 'conscious' or 'thinking', computer scientists concentrated on practicalities, and the Turing Test became a gold standard for AI.

In 1966 Joseph Weizenbaum created a program called ELIZA which mimicked a psychotherapist, scanning input for key words and using them in its response. Essentially ELIZA has a few clever conversational tricks to fool interviewees into thinking it understands what they were saying. For example:

Human: I feel sad

ELIZA: Why do you feel sad?

Many people found ELIZA convincing and it could pass the Turing Test 23 per cent of the time. The fact that AI sometimes produced this type of impressive result while still being obviously limited led to a boom-and-bust cycle. AI research has been alternately lavishly funded and abandoned during 'AI winters'. The first of these came in the 1970s when machine translation efforts foundered. The failure of Japan's over-ambitious Fifth Generation Computer Project led to another AI winter in the 1980s.

Basing a field on replicating something undefinable sounds as fanciful as angelology

But in the AI summers, the technology generates novel and lucrative applications. Machine translation, for example, though far from perfect is now highly capable.

In 1965 another British mathematician, Irving Good, one of Turing's co-workers at Bletchley Park, suggested that an intelligent machine could improve its own design. This would lead to a geometric progression beyond human levels of intelligence and comprehension. The acceleration into superintelligence – what Good called an 'intelligence explosion' – is known as the Singularity.

Sceptics argue that the Singularity may not even be possible. Physical limitations may prevent intelligence reaching above a certain level, just as they limit the fastest possible rocket. Or it may be that a flawed intelligence cannot correct itself because of its flaws.

In a 2017 survey of AI researchers, 29% thought an intelligence explosion was "likely" or "quite likely", 21% said it was "about even" and the remaining 50% thought it was "unlikely" or "quite unlikely". So even those working in the field were mainly unconvinced.

Since then, AI has improved dramatically (see **FT430:16**). In 2025, in a controlled version of the Turing Test competing with humans, ChatGPT had a win rate of 73%, meaning it was more convincingly human than the humans. Little wonder there are moves to force chatbots to identify themselves on the phone and online.

AI sceptics are adamant that the Turing Test is not a valid test of intelligence, taking us back to the problem of definition and measurement. We could just use the same IQ tests we use for humans.

In early 2024, the best AI scored 96 on the Norway Mensa IQ test, below the human average of 100. By March 2024 Claude 3 scored 101 and this rose to 120 in September 2024. By April 2025 the 03 version of ChatGPT had an IQ of 136, putting it in the top 15% of humans. Superhuman performance no longer seems so unlikely.

As people, not always those with lower IQ scores, invariably note, IQ is a meaningless abstract. But AI is also getting better at real-world tasks like writing computer programs. In the early 2020s, AIs were only good for first drafts and required human oversight. Now they are 'coding assistants' and in companies like Google, AI is writing 30% of the code. This may rise to 80% or more in the next year. The number of programmers being hired is expected to drop sharply.

AIs are also involved in AI research, in exactly the sort of self-improving development that could trigger Good's 'intelligence explosion'. Startup Sakana AI's AI Scientist reads research papers, generates new ideas, tests them and carries out experiments, writing up the results. AI Scientist has produced dozens of papers, some good enough to be accepted by science journals. It is currently rated as a mediocre novice researcher. But the improvement process has now started. And AI Scientist works much, much faster than a human and is cheaper to employ.

Sceptics note that every AI summer has been followed by a winter, that we have been through the AI hype cycle many times before, and that current systems may hit a plateau. ChatGPT's well-known tendency to hallucinate and give completely fake answers is a powerful reminder that AI is still a work in progress.

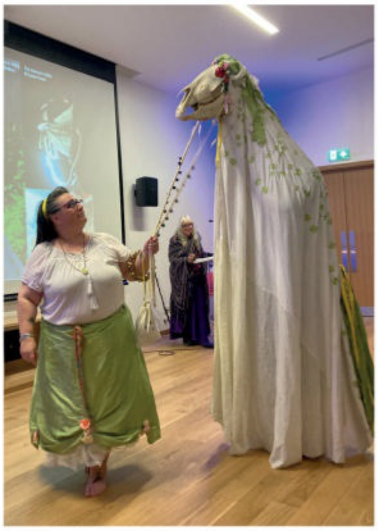
The Singularity remains a matter of faith. But a few years ago a survey of AI researchers found the average guesstimate was that the Singularity would occur by 2060. This has moved forward to 2040.

Arguments over whether AI is truly intelligent are not going to be resolved any time soon. But the technology is undeniably advancing and AI is rapidly becoming more capable. Scientific or not, it may not be long before we will all be able to judge for ourselves whether super-AI really is the Messiah, or just a fancy auto-complete.

HIDDEN CHARMS 5

ROB GANDY reports from Cardiff on the fifth biennial conference devoted to magical protection

ARCHANGEL12 / FLICKR



BRIAN HOGGARD

LEFT: The gardens of St Fagans Castle, Cardiff, a lovely setting for the conference. **BELOW**: Val Thomas introduces the Ickeny, accompanied by its 'Prodder' .

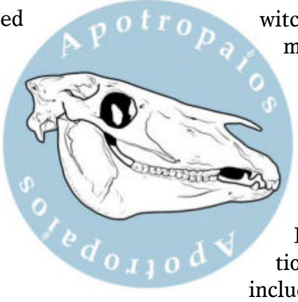
Nestling in wonderful beech woodland in the grounds of the magnificent St Fagans Castle and gardens just to the west of Cardiff, St Fagans National Museum of History[1] was an ideal location for Brian Hoggard's fifth Hidden Charms biennial conference, which took place on a fine day in April 2025. The apotropaic focus on objects and symbols used to protect people from supernatural harm attracted an audience of around 70 people.

As with previous events, Brian was the opening speaker. He conjured a world without electricity and motors, where people greatly feared dark magic. Protection was required while people slept, and cats and horses were used as guardians, given that cats are semi-nocturnal and horses can sleep standing up and with their eyes open. A de-fleshed horse skull looks fearsome and can scare away lesser spirits. Other methods of protection included witch-bottles, daisy wheels, burn marks created by candles and even shoes to lure and trap evil forces.

Following on, Dafydd Wiliam brought matters to St Fagans National Museum itself, providing a virtual tour of the best ritual protection marks within its historic buildings. Despite the temptation, a physical tour with all attendees was impractical. The marks crossed almost the full apotropaic spectrum, including some impressive burn marks and daisy wheels on wooden furniture, equipment and support structures.

After a break, Dr Petra Schad, built on her HC4 presentation about mummified cats (**FT435:21**) by talking about afterbirth pots being concealed beneath buildings in the south of Germany, some of which have a stake plunged through them. The belief was that if magic was done to an afterbirth, it would then affect the living human. Consequently, it was important to dispose of it safely. Petra also discussed the *Himmelsbrief*, supposedly a 'letter from heaven', which some people framed on their walls.

Continuing the international flavour, Louise Lindgaard then joined the conference from Denmark via video link. Louise described her research into the history of Danish witch trials and magical practices, and how as a curator she helped create HEX! The Museum of Witch Hunts in Denmark. This is located in Ribe, which is known as the 'Town of Witches'.[2] Between 1450 and 1750 there were some 2,000 witch trials in Denmark, with around 1,000 executions. All magical practice was seen as a crime, even the healing and protective kind. Recorded accusations of witchcraft included "Theft/death of bees" (3 cases) and "Beer spoiled" (21 cases). The museum houses artefacts such as animal remains, pots, amulets and parchments. Louise concluded by detailing examples of apotropaic marking found in Danish buildings.



The lunch break enabled people to chat and explore the grounds and buildings, before returning to listen to award-winning archæologist James Wright walk them through investigations into burn marks. Experimental archæology demonstrated that these were the result of deliberate human behavior, not accidents; which, along with history and folklore, pointed to their apotropaic purposes. Intriguingly, blue flames were thought to indicate the presence of spirits, possibly household protectors (or Georgie Fame?).

Mirko Gutjahr discussed written charms in mediæval burials and elsewhere, some of which were metal, including amulets; referencing Roberta Gilchrist's research on the topic.[3] He provided a map of where such items had been found across Britain and Europe, and illustrated some of the intricate ways messages were folded. He also described some of the messages themselves and their likely meaning.

The afternoon break was followed by the final session which focused on horses. Firstly, Eurwyn Wiliam spoke about concealed horse skulls in Wales, particularly those found in chapels over the last couple of centuries. There were some examples from other countries, to emphasise their ubiquity, but the focus was on Cambrian cases. He quoted major research and the main theories about why horse skulls were used, including the acoustic theory and the foundation sacrifice theory.

The last presentation was arguably the most spectacular. Val Thomas talked about the use of horse skulls in folk dance and guising, with lots of examples and great photographs from across the country. Her fascinating personal journey ended with the appearance of the Ickeny (a kind of Mari Llwyd) which is a tall mast horse with a skull on top. The Ickeny (Val's colleague Chris Wood was underneath) was accompanied by a 'Prodder'. This made for a really interesting and fun way to end the conference.

Brian concluded events by thanking everyone for attending. It had been a really good day with everyone having enjoyed themselves, the facilities and the excellent presentations, together with the associated debates and discussions. Brian is already planning Hidden Charms 6 for 2027, which will be in Edinburgh, where over 300 women and men were executed as witches on Castlehill. Check Brian's website at www.apotropaios.co.uk/ for further details.

NOTES

[1] https://museum.wales/stfagans/

[2] https://www.hexmuseum.dk/en/3583-2/

[3] R Gilchrist, "Magic for the dead? The archaeology of magic in later medieval burials", Medieval Archaeology", 52, 2008, pp.119-159. doi: 10.1179/174581708x335468

The end of Missenden Abbey

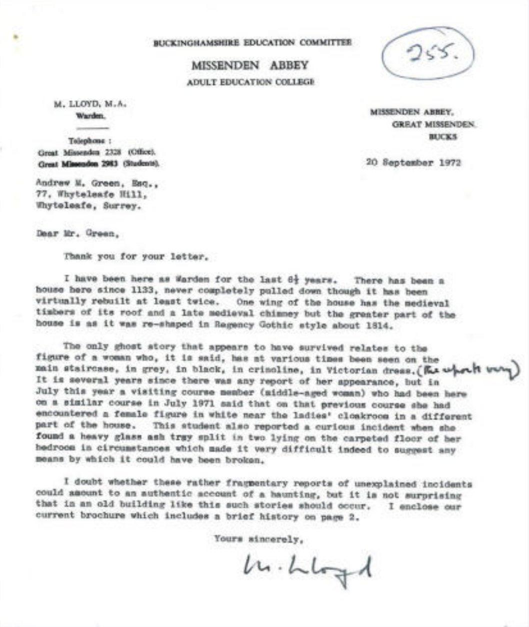
ALAN MURDIE laments the closure of another historic house with a tradition of ghost sightings

In June I was saddened to learn from the *Bucks Free Press* that Missenden Abbey in Buckinghamshire is set to close. This fine gothic-style house set in picturesque parkland is a pearl formed by an accretion of architectural layers over the centuries. Regrettably, the governing body of its owners, Buckinghamshire New University, have decreed it should be sold off to plug a gap in their finances, a classic example of 'selling the family silver' writ large. Also a popular venue for weddings and conferences, the closure of the Abbey will constitute a loss for ghost hunters.

Sadly, Missenden Abbey ranks alongside a number of listed buildings previously serving education and the wider community which have ended up as private housing in the last 15 years. Others include Pyke House at Battle in East Sussex, where the first evening classes dedicated to 'ghost hunting' were launched in 1971 and Belstead House, Ipswich, a former adult education college situated down the encouragingly named Sprites Lane. Yet another example is Sawston Hall, Cambridge, previously a language school. Whosoever ends up with Missenden as a prize is going to be buying a famous reputedly haunted site with the intangible asset of a ghost or two thrown in.

So in the interests of openness and transparency, and kindness to estate and land agents, let me share some details of its incorporeal heritage. As any regular *Bucks Free Press* readers know, the paper has frequently publicised claims of a monastic haunting at Missenden e.g. a 'phantom monk' (30 April 2013), 'the phantom Black Monk of 1503' (15 April 2016) even 'a sinful monk who has returned to haunt his place of sin' (3 Oct 2020) and so on.

Audacious press coverage aside, a phantom monk might be expected or even inevitable in a place with such a name and history, though virtually nothing now remains above ground level of the original monastic site established in 1133 by William de Missenden, the Lord of Petley Manor. Serving canons of the Augustinian order, it initially drew substantial benefactors, among them "all the best-known names in the county of Buckingham". Unfortunately, the reputation of the community proved a chequered one across the centuries, periodically punctuated by scandals.



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

MISSENDEN ABBEY

ADULT EDUCATION COLLEGE

255.

M. LLOYD, M.A.
Warden.

Telephone :
Great Missenden 2328 (Office).
Great Missenden 2983 (Students).

MISSENDEN ABBEY,
GREAT MISSENDEN.
BUCKS

20 September 1972

Andrew M. Green, Esq.,
77, Whyteleafe Hill,
Whyteleafe, Surrey.

Dear Mr. Green,

Thank you for your letter.

I have been here as Warden for the last 6½ years. There has been a house here since 1133, never completely pulled down though it has been virtually rebuilt at least twice. One wing of the house has the medieval timbers of its roof and a late medieval chimney but the greater part of the house is as it was re-shaped in Regency Gothic style about 1814.

The only ghost story that appears to have survived relates to the figure of a woman who, it is said, has at various times been seen on the main staircase, in grey, in black, in crinoline, in Victorian dress. ([illegible]) It is several years since there was any report of her appearance, but in July this year a visiting course member (middle-aged woman) who had been here on a similar course in July 1971 said that on that previous course she had encountered a female figure in white near the ladies' cloakroom in a different part of the house. This student also reported a curious incident when she found a heavy glass ash tray split in two lying on the carpeted floor of her bedroom in circumstances which made it very difficult indeed to suggest any means by which it could have been broken.

I doubt whether these rather fragmentary reports of unexplained incidents could amount to an authentic account of a haunting, but it is not surprising that in an old building like this such stories should occur. I enclose our current brochure which includes a brief history on page 2.

Yours sincerely,

M. Lloyd

> "The only ghost story that appears to survive relates to the figure of a woman on the staircase"

In 1361 Abbot Ralf Marshall was convicted of coin-clipping and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered, but was eventually pardoned. Around 1400, the monks were viewed as "bachelor country gentlemen more polished and more charitable, but little more learned or more pure in life than their lay neighbours", and later in the same century internal tensions erupted to a point where in 1462 Abbot Robert Risborough appealed for royal protection against his fellow canons and priors who were forced to give sureties not to either injure him or set fire to his house.

At the dissolution in 1538 the house passed through several hands until it reached Sir William Fleetwood (1535-1594), lawyer and Parliamentarian, whose descendants held it until 1787. Traces of the old Abbey were steadily erased by a succession of heirs, owners and tenants undertaking alterations and extensions into the early 19th century. Then, after the original Abbey church had been flattened to create a kitchen garden, there was a complete change of heart with an immense gothic-style rebuild undertaken to restore the antique features which previous occupiers had wilfully or casually desecrated, going so far as even to import original mediæval stained-glass roundels from the Continent to glaze its windows. The estate then passed to the Carrington family, who sold it in 1947 to Buckinghamshire County Council, whereupon it came under the sober and staid control of its Education Committee which opened it as a college. And it is in this phase that ghost stories began circulating.

In September 1972 ghost hunter Andrew Green wrote to the warden of Missenden Abbey, Mr M Lloyd, enquiring about ghosts, and evoking a rather lukewarm reply:

"There has been a house here since 1133, never completely pulled down though it has been rebuilt at least twice. One wing of the house has mediæval timbers of its roof and a late mediæval chimney, but the greater part of house is as it was reshaped in Regency Gothic style about 1814.

The only ghost story that appears to have survived relates to the figure of a woman, who it is said, has at various times been seen on the staircase, in grey, in black, crinoline, in Victorian dress. It is several years since there was any report of her appearance, but in July this year, a visiting course member (a middle-aged woman who had been here on a similar course in July 1971) said that on that previous course she had encountered a female figure in the ladies' cloakroom in a different part of the house. This student also reported a curious incident when a heavy ashtray split in two lying on the carpeted floor of her bedroom in circumstances which made it very difficult indeed to suggest any means by which it could have been broken.

I doubt whether these rather fragmentary reports of unexplained incidents could really amount to an authentic account of a haunting, but it is not surprising that in an old building like this, stories should occur."

ALAN MURDIE

ABOVE: Missenden Abbey. **FACING PAGE**: The letter sent by Mr M Lloyd, warden of the Abbey, to ghost hunter Andrew Green on 18 September 1972.

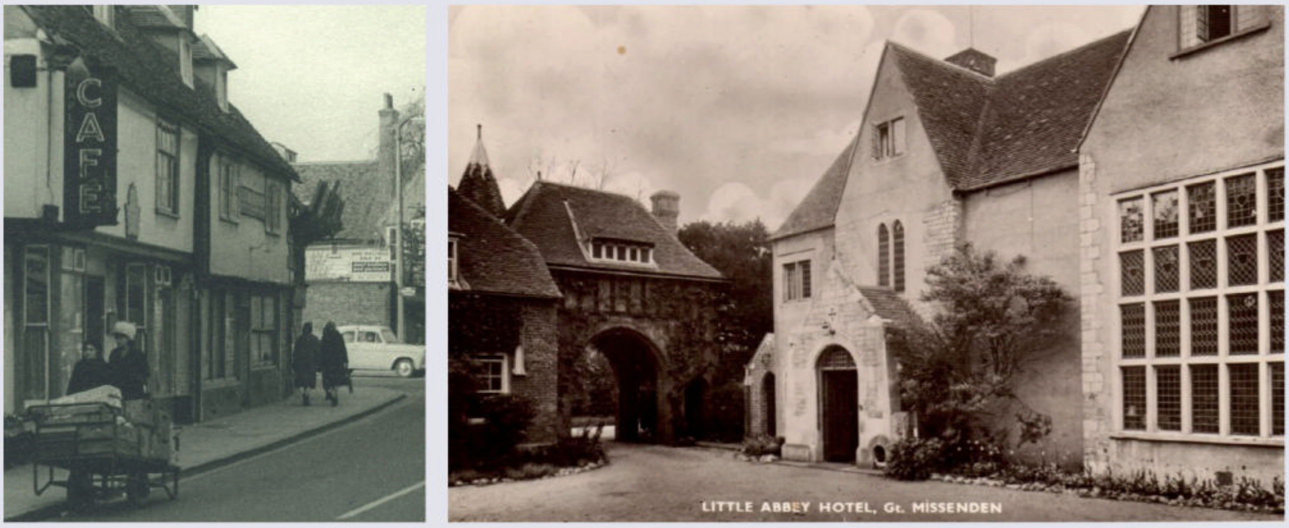
Now, just how one may interpret Mr Lloyd's statements becomes a matter of personal preference. For example, does his remark, "the only ghost story that appears to have survived" imply that more were known earlier? And was his remark that 'stories' were to be expected, a coded hint or a blanket dismissal?

This type of reticence and uncertainty is to be expected. Busy educationalists usually have more than enough administrative matters to handle without encompassing ghosts. In most cases, ghost reports, whether from students or staff, often get played down as a precautionary step to prevent alarm spreading among sensitive students. Administrators prefer secrecy, with the swift quashing of rumours deemed essential for avoiding perceived reputational damage and the embarrassment of academic ridicule. Generally, sightings only ever receive attention if top college officials report them (e.g. the apparition experienced by the Bursar at Peterhouse College in Cambridge in October 1997). Otherwise if they come to the notice of ghost hunters it is usually thanks to stray conversations, or hints dropped in leaked internal memos or tip-offs.

For instance, at Christmas 1996, the meticulous recorder of spectral incidents Tom Perrott (1922-2013; see **FT440:28-35, 441:46-51**) spoke at Great Amwell Ladies Club in Hertfordshire. One audience member mentioned Hertford Regional College in Ware, saying that Anwell House (known as 'F block') was haunted. She related how the college caretaker's dog, which followed him on his rounds, refused to enter certain areas, and a mysterious frying bacon smell was encountered by cleaners (apparently sparking a futile search for a suspected squatter).

Perrott's enquiries established that three years earlier in 1993 a lecturer (described as neither "mischievous or hysterical") followed a ghostly woman in a long grey dress who "floated up the main staircase to the prized 'Gilpin window", a 19th century-stained glass window. Two other staff later saw her, and she was nicknamed, 'Rose', possibly inspired by floral designs in the window. This information only emerged because another lecturer, a Mr Les Brandon, let slip some details in an internal college newsletter (*Hertford Regional College Bulletin* No.14 Christmas 1993) also telling how another staff member heard "a loud disembodied voice" say, "Sticks and stones" at 5.30 one evening on the landing. As it was, Mr Brandon considered the events only merited mention because of a coincidence: they prompted his memories of a haunted café called the Maple Leaf in Ware which operated during the 1960s in Baldock Street, just a five-minute walk away. The cafe was also haunted by a lady in a long grey dress, also nicknamed 'Rose' who "left the house most mornings at dawn". Unfortunately, Perrott learned the 'Maple Leaf' – given its name by its owner, who was a Canadian gentleman – had closed years before, while Hertford College refused to comment or allow any investigation. Thus ends many a ghost enquiry.

Returning to Missenden, Green also drew a blank and wondered like others whether a phantom lady in a dark dress was an interpretation of a misperceived monkish spectre, or vice versa. But there was one strange synchronicity. In the same week Mr Lloyd sent his reply, a ghost was seen in the Little Abbey Hotel in Great Missenden. This stood at the south-west tip of the Missenden Abbey estate with a secret tunnel said to link the two buildings. The witness was a hotel



ABOVE: The old Maple Leaf Café in Ware (left) and the Little Abbey Hotel in Great Missenden (right) – both were allegedly haunted.

handyman, a Mr Allison. Setting about repairing a mezzanine gallery window, he noticed: "A gentleman in a brown hooded cloak coming up the stairs. He had his hands together as if in prayer and as he passed me, I wished him a 'Good morning'."

Mr Allison resumed his work until, after a few minutes, he wondered what had become of the presumed guest. Apart from the toilets, all other rooms on the floor were locked. A quick check revealed no-one anywhere on the mezzanine floor. Mr Allison took the matter at once to Mrs Potten, the assistant manageress, who recalled hearing the previous owner stated that 50 years earlier a phantom monk appeared "scaring away servants from what is now the lounge." Andrew Green only learnt this much later, including this in his rather solemn *Ghosts of Today* (1980). Through subsequent garbled retellings, this same sighting has been mismatched with stories claimed to concern the nearby George Inn.

In 1982 Buckinghamshire Council commenced a major refurbishment programme at the Abbey accompanied by a modest amount of archæological excavations, which revealed a number of hitherto unknown monastic graves. Might this have stirred something uncanny?

Impossible to say, but what followed was tragic. On the night of 17 July 1985, a severe fire swept through a large section of the building, destroying the remaining mediæval features and in the east wing leaving only the walls standing. Fortunately, renovation resumed with the Abbey becoming a valued venue for ARCA, the Association of Residential Colleges; and then when universities were flush with money, it was acquired by what is today Buckinghamshire New University.

Since then, other claims have circulated concerning the Abbey. On old Christmas Day (now Epiphany, 6 January) sensitive people may perceive strange lights and smells and – a singular one this – a feeling like a thumbscrew being applied! As the Holy Inquisition never really operated in Britain local folklore ascribes this to the torture of monks directed by the Commissioners dispatched in 1539 acting on the orders of Henry VIII. Another alternative and equally unprovable proposition is this painful sensation in the sinews is a ghostly impression arising from cruel punishments inflicted on slaves of the Carrington family during the 18th century.

As with many low-level hauntings and sensory anomalies, these impressions are impossible to pin down to any particular era. With tactile sensations one enjoys the freedom to invent any hypothesis, whether serious or facetious, safe from fear of refutation since none is capable of being tested (save perhaps by the unreliable means of a séance). For all anyone can say, pained percipients are tuning into the vibrations of some aristocratic spectre suffering a gout attack occasioned by an overindulgence with port and claret one Christmas in the early 18th century!

Furthermore, closer examination of the sources places the uncanny agonies of early January at the Gatehouse of Missenden Abbey (*Bucks Free Press*, 30 April 2013) or at the former Little Abbey Hotel where Mr Allison saw the monk in 1972, which is now the private Chiltern Hospital. Presuming a scintilla of truth to the experience, at least potential medical means of alleviation are on hand.

In recent years Missenden Abbey has welcomed ghost hunting groups and 'fright night' events; and it certainly provides a comfortable location at a historic venue.

On my own visit and stay during July 2024 I found it hard to reconcile talk of hauntings with the peaceful ambience of the Abbey at twilight and the glow of variegated fairy lights winking around the frame of a wedding marquee erected in the grounds conveying a gentle mystique. However, staff told me of minor manifestations in and around the reception area. No apparitions, but unexplained footsteps on the stairs and other strange sounds reverberating in the early hours.

Like many an English haunted site, Missenden Abbey presents a montage of antique tales, historical events, repetitions, contradictions, contemporary experiences and even absurdities tacked together by a multitude of hands. Most recently I learned that a team of ghost hunters visiting the Abbey in spring 2025 logged some intriguing incidents. Precise details remain confidential, but there is enough of qualitive interest (including experiences in the proximity of a former monastic grave) to suggest any peremptory dismissal of ghosts at Missenden Abbey would be premature.

Sources: *Archaeological Investigations at Missenden Abbey*, 1983-88 (2020) by Yvonne Edwards, Jill Hender and Marion Wells and others; *This Haunted Isle* (1984) Peter Underwood; *Bucks Free Press*, 21 Aug 2021 and 16 June 2025; 'Four friends go ghost hunting in Great Missenden', *Spooky Isles* website, 4 Dec 2016: www.spookyisles.com/great-missenden-ghost-hunting/

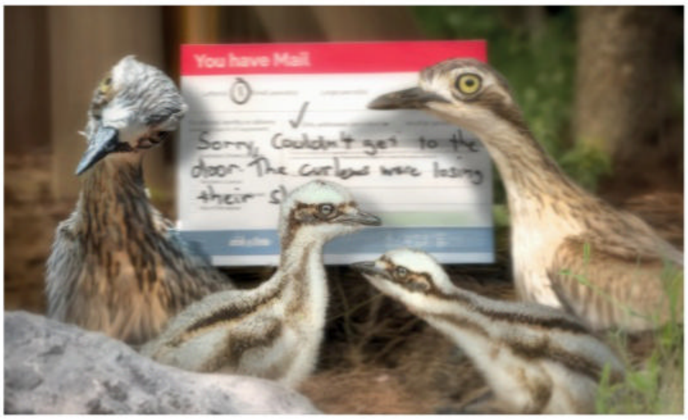
DELAYED MESSAGES

Another collection of mail fails, including a long-lost job application and a postie thwarted by nesting curlews

● In 1976 Tizi Hodson applied for her dream job as a motorcycle stunt rider, but never got a reply. "Every day I looked for my post, but there was nothing there and I was so disappointed because I really, really, wanted to be a stunt rider on a motorcycle." Forty eight years later she found out why. Opening her mail one morning last October, she found her original letter, returned to her by the Post Office with a note written on the top saying: "Late delivery by Staines Post Office. Found behind a draw [sic]. Only about 50 years late" – it had never reached its destination.

"How they found me when I've moved house 50-odd times, and even moved countries four or five times, is a mystery," Hodson said. The failure of this application did not stand in the way of an adventurous life; Hodson went on to live in Africa, where she spent time as a snake handler and horse whisperer, learned to fly and became an aerobatic pilot and flying instructor, before returning to the UK and settling in Gedney, Lincolnshire. *BBC News, 6 Oct 2024.*

● In August 2024, an unseasonable Christmas-themed card arrived at the Cradock Street branch of the Swansea Building Society. It was not just a few months late; it turned out to have been posted 121 years before. The card was addressed to Lydia Davies, who would have been 16 at the time and was one of six children who lived at the address in 1903, when it was still a house. It came from a man called Ewart who was apologising for being unable to pick up a "pair" of something, saying "I am so sorry, but I hope you are enjoying yourself at home," and adding that he "has about 10 shillings in pocket money, not counting the train fare, so I am doing alright." He then asked Lydia to "remember me to (Mssrs) Gilbert and John, with love to all." *BBC News, 21 Aug 2024.*


You have Mail
Sorry, Couldn't get to the door. The curlews were losing their sh

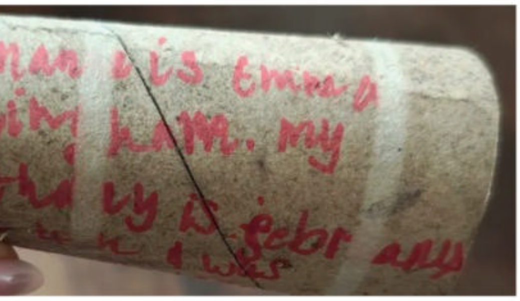
LEFT: The card left for 'Deano' by his postman. **BELOW LEFT**: The Christmas card that took 121 years to arrive. **BOTTOM LEFT**: Tizi Hodson and her "late delivery". **BOTTOM RIGHT**: The toilet roll note found by Charlotte England-Black.

> "Sorry, couldn't get to the door. The curlews were losing their shit"

● As he was leaving his flat in Aigburth, Liverpool, Mikey Reid noticed a brown envelope in the communal hall. "It was quite strange because it was just a brown envelope addressed to the building, so I was like – do I open it because I live in one of the flats?" The envelope contained a postcard from 1909, sending birthday greetings to Annie McBurnie, who had lived in the building at the time. The card was in excellent condition and has prompted Reid to begin researching the history of his building and the surrounding area. Initially he was mystified as to who could have sent the card, but the envelope also contained another card giving the address of an X account belonging to "postfrombefore". Further investigation showed that this belonged to two friends from Liverpool who have been collecting historic postcards and letters found in junk shops, car boot sales and the like, then sending them to their original addresses. They act anonymously, saying that this ensures the focus is "on the recipient and the people from the cards rather than ourselves," adding, "through the postcards we are bringing back to life people that have been long forgotten. This could be people that maybe lived in our houses from 100 years ago or 150 years ago that we wouldn't even have heard of or thought of. When we had these cards, we thought the best place for those is either the family of the person that sent it or received it, or maybe the owner of the house now." *liverpoolecho.co.uk, 22 Jan 2025.*

● Working in the loft of her terraced house in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire, in February, Charlotte England-Black discovered a note written on a cardboard toilet roll tube by a seven-year-old named Emma in the 1980s. It gave her name and birthday and said: "Hope you enjoy staying here, love from a friend." Through Facebook, England-Black tracked down the writer, Emma Smith, now 43 and still living in Nottingham. She could not remember leaving the note but said it was "a funny old blast from the past" which gave her "goose pimples", adding "I don't remember doing the toilet roll thing and why I chose the toilet roll, we'll forever be wondering." She recalled the house fondly, saying: "It was a lovely place to spend those years." England-Black planned to return the tube to the loft to pass the message on to future owners, saying, "I don't know if we'll still be here in another 35 years, but whoever's in the house then might find it." *BBC News, 7 Jul 2025.*

● While the parcel destined for a man named as 'Deano', from Cairns in Australia, was only delayed by a day or so, the reason turned out to be somewhat startling. He has bush stone curlews, a ground nesting bird, breeding around his house, and, as he explained, "They are usually pretty timid. Their main defence is to lay flat on the ground and pretend to be a stick, but when they have chicks they can be a little more aggressive. They hold their wings out to look bigger and will walk straight at you wailing and hissing. It's a bit intimidating, but they won't actually bite." However, this was more than enough for the postie, who left Deano a message reading, "Sorry, couldn't get to the door. The curlews were losing their shit," and fled without making a delivery. Deano got his parcel the next day by collecting it from the post office. *newsweek.com, 25 Feb 2025.*



THE CONSPIRASPHERE

NOEL ROONEY wonders whether it all adds up as he grapples with the numerology of major terrorist incidents and has a strange experience with his Amazon order...

NUMBER THEORY

The 20th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings – a particularly dark day in recent British history – passed fairly quietly. There was a public memorial service for the victims and their families, which was respectful and well attended. Some legacy media published stories, mostly of the '20 years after' variety.

In the Conspirasphere, posts on 7/7 were largely restricted to those sites that posted the most at the time of the event. This, perhaps, partly demonstrates the endurance of some theories, and partly suggests that (some) people move on, even in the C-sphere. Something that did stand out for me, however, was the longevity of numerological accounts of the events.

There is a well developed school of numerology around major terrorist incidents, so much so that the idea seeps into writing that is in other respects mundane; writers whose motivation is purely political (in the sense that writing about the deep state is political) often include these numerical anomalies in their books and posts.

I don't have space to lay out the entire schema here (that would take an entire book), but I thought I would point at some of the more famous – and frankly bizarre – aspects of the genre. The first thing to understand here is that most numerological accounts take 9/11 as their starting point. That date becomes the fulcrum on which other dates and details are elevated.

So, we have the 9/11 atrocity in 2001. Then we see the Bali bombing in 2002; 10/12/02 in American dating parlance, and as many have noted, each element of this date adds one to the original event date – 9/11/01 becomes 10/12/02. In 2003, a series of truck bombs in Istanbul were apparently set to explode at 11 minutes past nine.

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THURSDAY'S WEST END FINAL
TERRORISTS
ATTACK
LONDON
-MANY
DEAD
TERROR BOMBS EXPLODE ACROSS LONDON

ELLYWA / CREATIVE COMMONS

> *Numbers may cluster around events, just as events tend to form clusters*

More strikingly, the Madrid train bombings in 2004 fell on 3/11, and, as was first reported in legacy media, they happened precisely 911 days after 9/11. The following year we saw 7/7, which I'll examine presently, but the year afterwards, there was a large attack in Mumbai, on 11 of July (7/11) when seven trains were bombed in 11 minutes. So far, so spooky.

On the morning of 7/7, explosions occurred on three tube trains, more or less simultaneously, at around 11 minutes to nine. The best estimate is that they all occurred over a span of 52 seconds, and they killed 52 people. In numerology as it is commonly used, one adds integers to get the core number: 5 + 2 = 7 and 5 + 2 = 7, and thus 7/7.

One of the trains was train number 311. The bus that exploded in Tavistock Square was a Dennis Trident; in English gematria, Dennis gets you 11, and Trident gets you 9; a similar exercise on the registration number (LX03 BUF) produces 3 (LX03) and 11 (BUF). I could go on in a similar vein, but I think you get the picture; and you can probably see that it took a good number of people working hard at esoteric arithmetic to uncover such a comprehensively strange set of coincidences (in the fullest sense of that term).

When I first encountered these ideas, I wondered if they had something to do with the arbitrary – but internally coherent – nature of the calendar; however, I was not then and am still not a good enough mathematician to prove it. Alternatively, one might think in terms of high strangeness, in which case I see two options.

First, we may be in Loren Coleman territory here; numbers may cluster around events just as events themselves tend to form clusters. Secondly, one might draw an analogy from claims made about random number generators – the idea that they produce significantly less random number strings when large events occur, particularly tragic events.

And of course, we are at liberty to dismiss this whole thing as a cranky farrago of arithmetical weirdness from folks who need something better to do. For conspiracists, however, a more sinister idea inevitably emerges: if such stark coincidences appear regularly around events of a similar nature, then perhaps they are there by design. It is passing curious to imagine terrorists motivated by numerology.

I had a strange, conspiracy-related experience of my own recently. I ordered a book from Amazon – *False Flags Over Europe*, by Nick Kollerstrom – and a parcel arrived, on time. I opened the parcel and found the book I had ordered, or, at least, the cover of said book. When I opened it, I saw a frontispiece with the legend 'Nothing's Impossible'; not, I thought, a very Kollerstrom motto. I turned the page to discover that the book inside the cover was indeed called *Nothing's Impossible*, a no doubt moving and compelling account of one person's life in animal rescue.

But not, clearly, the book I had ordered; one of Mr Bezos's vaunted robots had perhaps gone rogue (which doesn't bode well for our future under AI). I laboured through Amazon's rather hostile complaints system until I could communicate with another human being, and my charming interlocutor arranged for a free replacement, and even allowed me to keep the oddball version I already had; she had no opinion on whether this was a frequent occurrence, unfortunately.

If it had been any other genre of book one might have laughed it off. But a little voice in my head wondered if the robot had conspired to rearrange the letters of Kollerstrom's book into something more edifying, to dissuade me from reading such forbidden literature. 'All watched over by machines of loving grace'?

https://freetofindtruth.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-numerology-of-77-london-bombings.html; Terror on the Tube: Behind the Veil of 7/7, by Nick Kollerstrom, Progressive Press 2012. See chapter 13 (I know) for details.

SA'S SATANIC GANGS

Devil-worshipping gangs combining occult symbols and rituals with organised crime are terrorising South Africa

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Kelly Smith, the mother of missing Joshlin Smith (right), appears in court in South Africa in 2024. Smith reportedly sold her daughter to a sangoma "for her eyes and skin". **BELOW**: A young BTK gang member's tattoo.

While gangs in Haiti, Mexico and West Africa have long been known for combining organised crime with the occult, criminologist Ashwill Phillips has revealed that this toxic combination has also appeared in South Africa in recent years, first gaining a foothold in the Gauteng and Free State provinces in the early 21st century. The roots of the South African gangs lie in a group, described as an "evil church", that moved from northern Africa to Lesotho in 1997, blending Christian-derived Satanism with traditional African witchcraft.

By 2011, this cult had expanded across the South African border and into the Free State, with their rituals and beliefs being taken on by at least 40 criminal gangs in the state, such as the Triple 6 (666), Born-To-Kill (BTK), Natural Born Killers (NBK), International Junior Portuguese (IJP), and Maroma (Romans/Romas). More recent gangs include the Nigels (!), 17-To-Hell, Illuminati, Girls Never Respect (GNR7) and Dogs of Corruption.

As well as the normal activities of criminal gangs, such as territorial violence, extortion, kidnap and drug trafficking, these groups use the occult to reinforce their dominance and to spread fear, resulting in them being known locally as "devil-worshipping gangs". Their "worship" is alleged to include ritual murder, cannibalism, shapeshifting and communication with demons. As with many gangs, members are identified by tattoos, but in devil-worshipping gangs, these have another dimension: "Symbols and tattoos is firstly to get access to the spiritual realm, that's the first reason why they place it on themselves… these individuals, they will say that they cannot have access to the individual on a spiritual level [without the 'chup' or tattoo]," said one gangster.

While most of the gangs combine Christian symbolism, such as inverted crosses and "666" tattoos, with traditional "dark side" practices from African traditions, such as blood oaths, eating human organs and the use of muti (which in this context tends to mean magic using human body parts), individual gangs vary in the emphasis they put on each. One member reported "IJP and Roma believe in muti, while BTK and Triple 6 believe in getting power from the Devil. They say they speak to Lucifer to give them powers."

> *"Symbols and tattoos is firstly to get access to the spiritual realm"*

The overtly Satanic gangs also carry out animal sacrifice rituals such as slaughtering black cats and drinking their blood. A significant number of gang members are children, some as young as 12. "Some children say they get powers from the Devil – they use that muti – they will tell you they use this power and sometimes you will also see that this child has a lot of power and strength. When you look at that child, you will see there is something wrong with that child. They get physically strong," one informant told Phillips. Many join the gangs specifically for the spiritual power and have to go through initiation rituals to gain it. These usually require the initiate to carry out a blood sacrifice by murdering someone chosen by the gang leader. They are then required to drink the blood of the victim and sometimes they also have to remove the victim's genitals, which are then consumed by the gang member or mixed with muti and buried in a cemetery.

Rituals are guided by spiritual leaders within the gangs, often referred to as the King, Queen or Priest, who are experienced sangomas from the local African tradition and have considerable power over members. Gang initiates believe their rituals induce demonic possession, which makes them invincible and also invisible to police, enabling them to commit their crimes with impunity. Gangsters need to make "promises" too, which involve offering their souls, or those of loved ones, to demonic entities including "Lucifer, Danzil and Bizelbab" in exchange for occult powers. One of the gang members Phillips interviewed said: "The minute you drink blood you are invoking spirits to become part of you, demons to become part of you, and give you the powers that you need to do what you have to do." High ranking members, often seemingly respectable businessmen, are believed to have developed godlike powers through extensive rituals, promises and sacrifice, possessing the ability to astrally project, speak to the dead or control demons.

Occult gangs now seem to be spreading beyond the Free State and Gauteng province, and may be involved in a case that recently made the headlines worldwide, in which Kelly Smith, the mother of six-year-old Joshlin, from Cape Town, was accused of orchestrating her daughter's kidnapping. Smith, who allegedly has a history of drug problems, is accused of selling Joshlin to a local sangoma, who, it was claimed, was interested in the girl "for her eyes and skin"; Joshlin has a fair complexion and blue-green eyes. A local pastor said that he had heard Smith talk of selling her three children for 20,000 rand (£850) each, and after Joshlin vanished, Smith's friend Lourentia Lombaard claimed Smith had told her she had desperately needed money, so had "done something silly… I sold my child to a sangoma". Lombaard said that she had tried, without success, to stop Smith from selling her daughter, and appealed to whoever had taken the young girl to "please bring her back alive". *BBC News, 18 Mar; theconversation.com, 10 Jul 2025; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2025.2482117.*

NECROLOG

This month, we wave off a high-profile US 'skeptic' and investigator of strange phenomena who ruffled fortean feathers while denying he was a debunker

JOE NICKELL

ABOVE LEFT: Various Joe Nickells hard at work in his office and laboratory. **BELOW**: Nickell in 1983 with his recreation of Nazca's 'giant condor'.

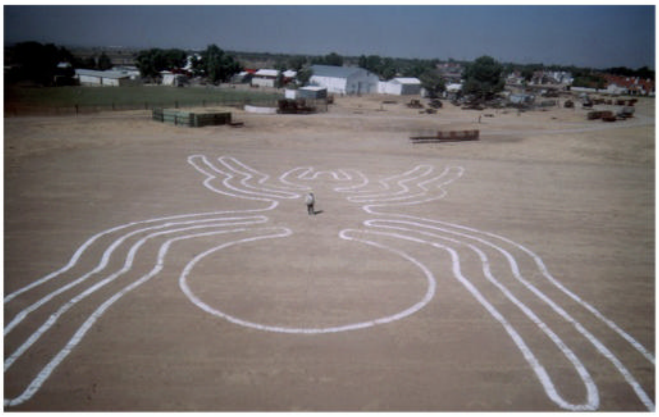
JOE NICKELL

Joe Nickell – one of the most distinctive and influential agents of the 'humanist-skeptic' movement spearheaded by the US-based Committee for Scientific Inquiry (CSI; formerly CSICOP) – died recently at his home in Buffalo, New York, at the age of 80. In an interview with the *Daily Mail* (7 Aug 2017) he carefully distanced himself from what he called the "believers and debunkers" of the skeptic movement, by which he meant "people whose minds have been made up prior to inquiry".

Instead, Nickell aimed to be "a fair-minded investigator", a trait that evolved out of his childhood interest in stage-magic and sleight-of-hand performance, inspired by his admiration for Houdini, who used his skills to expose 'trickery' and fraud. Over the years he worked in an impressive number of careers in diverse fields, practising what he called 'participatory journalism' to tell a story from a more authentic point of view. More than 1,000 of these 'personas' are listed on his homepage (www.joenickell.com/) and in each one, he declares: "I have been a detective, for it's my way of investigating life."

As a "magician and mentalist" Nickell began to investigate Spiritualist claims, beginning in 1969, when for CBC Radio he attended a live séance in Toronto that attempted to contact the spirit of Houdini. Broadening his remit, he went on to investigate a wide variety of claims for paranormal phenomena including 'spontaneous combustion' (on which he once spoke at FT's UnConvention), bleeding and weeping statues, 'miraculous' healings, poltergeist and other hauntings, UFO-related incidents, 'ghost' photos, reincarnation claims and various fortean-related 'monsters' and 'man-beasts', to name a few. "All supposedly beyond the range of nature and normal human experience," he said, while believing a rational explanation would sooner or later be forthcoming for all such phenomena.

"In time, my work came to the attention of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)," he wrote. His first article for CSICOP appeared in their magazine *Skeptical Inquirer* for Spring 1983 and described his attempt to recreate Nazca's 'giant condor' landscape image. That same year saw the publication of his first substantive book, *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*, after which he averaged a book a year.



JOE NICKELL

Nickell's output was not confined to the mysterious; he was a published poet and investigated several literary and historical forgeries, including the notorious 'Jack the Ripper Diary' and the late-19th century account of the Tennessee 'Bell Witch' poltergeist (see **FT359:44-49, 360:52-57**) as well as various cartographic enigmas. In these fields he was an acknowledged expert on materials, penmanship, and the techniques of making and detecting such forgeries.

Nickell was elected a Fellow of CSICOP/CSI in 1988, and Senior Research Fellow in 1995, joining their Executive Council in 1993 while regularly writing his 'Investigative Files' column for *Skeptical Inquirer* and 'Skeptical Briefs' for their newsletter. He received academic and professional recognition for his work and it forms a significant part of CSI's confident outreach. In 2011, the asteroid '31451 (1999 CE10)' was named 'JoeNickell' in his honour by its discoverer James E McGaha.

Skeptical Inquirer's memorial issue for Nickell (July/Aug 2025) published many heartfelt testimonials to his character and achievements and accounts of his dedication, work ethic, generosity, sense of humour and affability. Since his early days he adopted the habit of handing out 'wooden nickels' instead of a calling card, especially during sleight-of-hand demonstrations.

While his pragmatic conclusions satisfied his skeptical colleagues, forteans might wish he had gone further in acknowledging the authentic aspects of subjective experience and the complicated nature of 'evidence' itself. Nickell, however, carefully chose to draw the line at what was measurable and demonstrative.

In an interview with Jonathan Jarry of McGill University's Office for Science and Society, he said: "We skeptics tend to listen to a far-fetched story and go into 'debunking mode'... and that's often warranted. Paranormal, supernatural, and pseudoscientific beliefs have so far not been justified by the evidence. But in so doing, we risk dismissing a phenomenon by using an explanation that simply doesn't fit, and we lose the trust of the public." If he accepted the term 'debunker', he argued, it would give "the impression that Nickell is going to go to that next haunting to debunk it." "No, no" he added emphatically, "that's not what I do. I am going there to try to find out what exactly happened in this case. Not 200 other cases; this one! I want to find out exactly what happened. If I can explain it and you believe me, then any needed debunking is taken care of itself."

It was often said that Joe Nickell did not believe in gods or an after-life; yet never called himself an atheist. He would say, instead, that he was a "secular humanist" which he defined as "an atheist with a heart".

Joseph Herman Nickell, investigator of fakery and the paranormal, born 1 Dec 1944 Lexington, Kentucky; died Buffalo, New York, 4 Mar 2025, aged 80.

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

THE ALMSCLIFFE FAIRIES

From a distance, Almscliffe Crag in Wharfedale looks like a ruined citadel: a jagged spine of millstone grit rising between Leeds and Harrogate. Today it draws climbers and sightseers. But in the years before WWI, it drew stories, like the goose that vanished in a gap in the rock and reappeared five miles away; and, above all, there were fairies: "The eyes of our fore-elders saw fairies sporting over Almscliffe as abundantly as we see rabbits now." The Almscliffe fairies were two feet high, vivid in scarlet and green, and quick as lightning. They lived in the cracks and crannies of the rock, most famously in the 'Fairy Parlour', a narrow vertical slit in the stone, also called the 'Fairy Hole'. One cavity resonated with the sound of a chair creaking gently, as if a fairy was sitting on a rocking chair within. In basins on the Crag, 'country people' dropped pins (with blood) to cure warts or bless sickly children. And, as in many fairy sites, the fairies stole children and replaced them with 'changelings'.

ONE CAVITY RESONATED WITH THE SOUND OF A CHAIR CREAKING, AS IF A FAIRY WAS SITTING ON A ROCKING CHAIR

I'm just finishing an edited collection on West Eurasian changelings and three individuals from the countryside around Almscliffe stand out because they are the best recorded 'changelings' from Britain and perhaps from Europe. They appear in church records, census returns and local anecdotes. Let me introduce you first to their parents. The Bradleys of North Rigton were poor farmers. They lived in the 1770s in a cottage below the Crag. William and Sarah, the father and mother, were ordinary in stature. Of their eight children, five grew into normal-sized adults. But three, the 'changelings', Thomas, Sally, and Fanny "were dwarfish, crooked and ill-tempered, and never married". Thomas barely reached four feet; Fanny and Sally, three. Fanny, so the story went, stood in customers' pockets to measure heads: she was a hat-maker. By the 1840s, the three were well known in Wharfedale. One villager recalled Fanny fondly as "a very little old woman" who sold pens and pencils to schoolboys on the side. Tommy was remembered as being lean, "remarkably profane", and cheerful to chat with. One boy confessed to feeling 'awe' in his presence, for there was always the whispering about 'changelings'. Why? Perhaps because the Bradleys were average-sized and no one in Wharfedale had heard of recessive genes? Was it because the Crag loomed nearby? Or was it because Sarah, it was said, once took the three into a field near Almscliffe, and while she reaped, the fairies came. In the logic of the hills, this made perfect sense. Almscliffe fairies rocked, they healed and sometimes they changed children.

Simon Young and Davide Ermacora have just brought out *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings: European Traditions.*

Witnessed by Nighteyes?

NIGEL WATSON exlpains why a notorious alien abduction case is back in the spotlight

COURTESY NETFLIX

ABOVE: Linda Napolitano in the new Netflix documentary *The Manhattan Alien Abduction*.

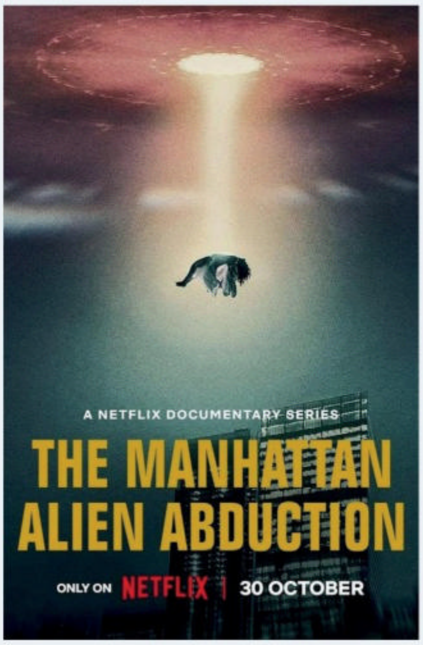
The Manhattan Alien Abduction, a three-part documentary directed by Vivienne Perry and Daniel Vernon (available on Netflix), has brought an old abduction case back into the spotlight. Linda Napolitano (named Cortile in the earliest reports) claimed that in the early morning of 30 November 1989, she was floated through her closed Manhattan apartment window (see **FT154:25, 313:71, 315:71**).

The documentary repeatedly shows her floating on her back outside the apartment block, but does not mention how she was taken inside a hovering spaceship, or show it plunging into the Hudson or how she was returned home.

It is claimed that at least 23 witnesses saw her drifting in the sky, or a blue-white light in the vicinity, whilst there was a power cut. Later, Linda claimed the Secretary General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, and his two security guards witnessed this and were abducted at the same time.

Abduction research pioneer Budd Hopkins regarded this as the best case ever and Linda became the subject of his book *Witnessed: The True Story of the Brooklyn Bridge UFO Abductions* (Pocket Books, 1996). Using hypnotic regression, Linda revealed further details of the encounter, and in February 1991 Budd began receiving letters from the two security guards, Richard and Dan.

Linda claimed that in November 1989 she was floated through her closed Manhattan apartment window


A NETFLIX DOCUMENTARY SERIES
THE MANHATTAN ALIEN ABDUCTION
ONLY ON NETFLIX | 30 OCTOBER

Richard and Dan visited Linda at her apartment, which left her feeling vulnerable and scared. In April 1991 they kidnapped her in a black Mercedes and interrogated her about her abduction for hours as they drove through the streets of New York. A few months later, in October, Dan threatened her with a gun and made sexual advances to her. At Christmas, he wrote a long letter saying he hated her and thought she was the spawn of hybrid breeding.

George Hansen, Joseph J Stefula and Richard D Butler were the first to publicly question this story, noting that Budd had done very little to confirm Linda's story, and that all the other evidence came from correspondents who refused to meet him.[1] Hansen and company outraged Budd's supporters by saying that if Linda's accounts of her meetings with Richard and Dan were true, then they should be reported to the police or other authorities.

As this was going on, Budd's wife, Carol Rainey, filmed Linda's story, and much of her footage is shown in this documentary. Carol was originally impressed by Linda and her screen presence, but began having doubts about her story as it became increasingly incredible. Budd, on the other hand, was thoroughly hooked by Linda's

COURTESY NETFLIX

ABOVE: Abduction researcher Budd Hopkins used hypnotic regression to ‘retrieve’ further details of Linda’s abduction experience. **BELOW**: Linda and Hopkins on the cover of Mufon UFO Journal in 1992. **BOTTOM**: Budd’s wife, filmmaker Carol Rainey.

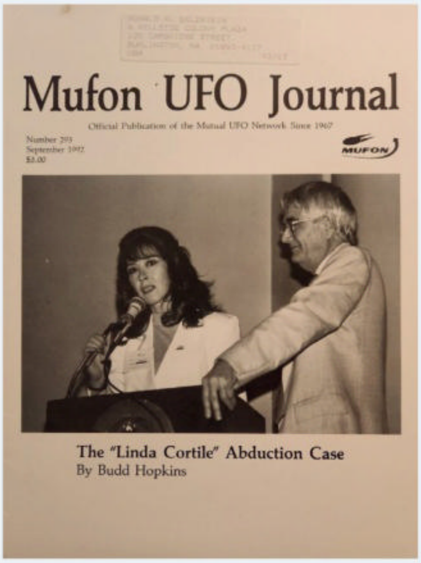
claims and it became a source of conflict between the couple.

Reddit user ‘Open Mortgage 4645’ hits the nail on the head: “It’s a pretty crazy story. I always liked Budd Hopkins and his work, but he was a credulous man with an agenda, and he was always very eager to believe anything that confirmed his preconceived notions. He was a nice man with good intentions, but he had a blind spot when it came to the stories he bought into.”

‘Wise Chef 8613’ on Reddit highlights how Hopkins defended his investigations: “When factually challenged on the things he wrote he would always pull the same appalled routine and revert to a version of ‘Just because you don’t believe something doesn’t make it a lie – how dare you accuse another human being of being a liar! How awful!’”

In Tim Prinity’s *SUNlite* e-magazine, Luis R González reviews *Witnessed* and adds several comments about the Netflix documentary. He demolishes the statement that 23 people saw Linda and/or a UFO the night she was abducted, and instead boils it down to two witnesses: “Janet Kimball” and Cathy Turner.

Regarding the X-ray of a ¼-inch (6.5 mm) curly wire structure inside Linda’s nose; this was obtained by her podiatrist niece using a foot X-ray machine. There was a delay of several days before reporting it to Budd Hopkins and by that time Linda had had a nosebleed that flushed it away – or the aliens had retrieved it.



Mufon UFO Journal

The “Linda Cortile” Abduction Case
By Budd Hopkins

One explanation is that when the X-ray was taken Linda could have put an electronic resistor inside, or taped it outside her nose for a few seconds.[2]

It is very damning that Linda’s story has been compared to a novel entitled, *Nighteyes* by Garfield Reeves-Stevens (Doubleday, 1989). This features government agents, abductions and other details very similar to the events related by Linda.[3]

Researcher Luis R González, in another *SUNlite* article, “Betrayed by a Night Gaze: Linda Napolitano & *Nighteyes*. Final Considerations” (2025) contends that the three main points in Linda Cortile’s abduction were:

“(a) Abductee speaking an alien tongue, (b) Abductee working with the aliens, (c) Sexual bonding since childhood between pairs of abductees.

“All these elements appeared in *Nighteyes* several months before the alleged abduction. This is, at least, clear evidence of sociological influence or, in the worst-case scenario, proof of a hoax.” [4]

Pro-UFO researchers have alleged that there are sometimes close similarities between fictional and factual cases because the producers of fictional accounts have actually experienced alien abductions and other paranormal events. Their fiction is a means of dramatically re- packaging their strange experiences in a manner that is socially acceptable.

As an endnote, the estate of Napolitano and Hopkins filed a suit against Netflix to try to stop the film being streamed on 30 October 2024. They did not like the fact that the documentary shows Carol Rainey as an expert sceptic, whereas they call her an “embittered, alcoholic ex-wife hell bent on revenge against her husband.” And, furthermore, Napolitano alleges it defames her character because it casts her as “a villain for purposes of controversy and conflict.”

COURTESY NETFLIX

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2 www.astronomyufo.com/UFO/SUNlite17_2.pdf

3 Stefula, Butler and Hansen, op. cit.

4 www.astronomyufo.com/UFO/SUNlite17_2.pdf

ENGLAND'S MOST HAUNTED?

FREDERICK SANDERS AND THE ORIGINS OF PLUCKLEY'S GHOSTS

Pluckley in Kent has been dubbed "the most haunted village in England", but does it deserve its popular reputation? Certainly, it boasts plenty of ghost stories, but where did they come from? SIMON MORETON goes in search of local ghost hunter Frederick Sanders and the origin of Pluckley's multiple spooks.

Pluckley is a small English village located on the northern edge of the Kentish Weald between Maidstone and Ashford. It was an Anglo-Saxon settlement, boasts a 14th century church, and found fame in the 1990s as the setting for a TV adaptation of HE Bates's *Darling Buds of May* novels. Pluckley also enjoys a reputation as "the most haunted village in England", a somewhat contested accolade first accorded to the village in 1950 and bolstered by a mention – though not an actual award – in the 1989 *Guinness Book of World Records*.[1]

THE VILLAGE WITH A DOZEN GHOSTS

REALIMAGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Pluckley's village sign: church and oasthouses, but no ghosts. **RIGHT**: St Nicholas, Pluckley, where Frederick Sanders mounted his first ghost hunts in 1939.

To many forteans of a certain vintage, mention of the village will bring back memories of *All About Ghosts*, written by Chris Maynard and first published in 1977 by Usborne as part of its 'World of the Unknown' series (see **FT385:32-37**). The book featured a two-page spread on "the village with a dozen ghosts" comprising a map of Pluckley marked with descriptions of the village's phantoms and photographs of their haunts. These included the spectre of a highwayman run-through with a sword while hiding in a hollow oak; the screaming ghost of a man who died in a quarry; a ghostly miller that appears on stormy nights; the shade of the 'Red Lady' and another woman in contemporary dress, both of whom haunt a graveyard; the 'White Lady' who haunts the site of a demolished mansion; the spectres of a schoolmaster and a military man, both of whom hanged themselves; a phantom coach and horses heard but not seen on a local road; the shape of an old woman who died after accidentally setting herself on fire; a spectral monk, and the revenant of a lady who poisoned herself in a local house.

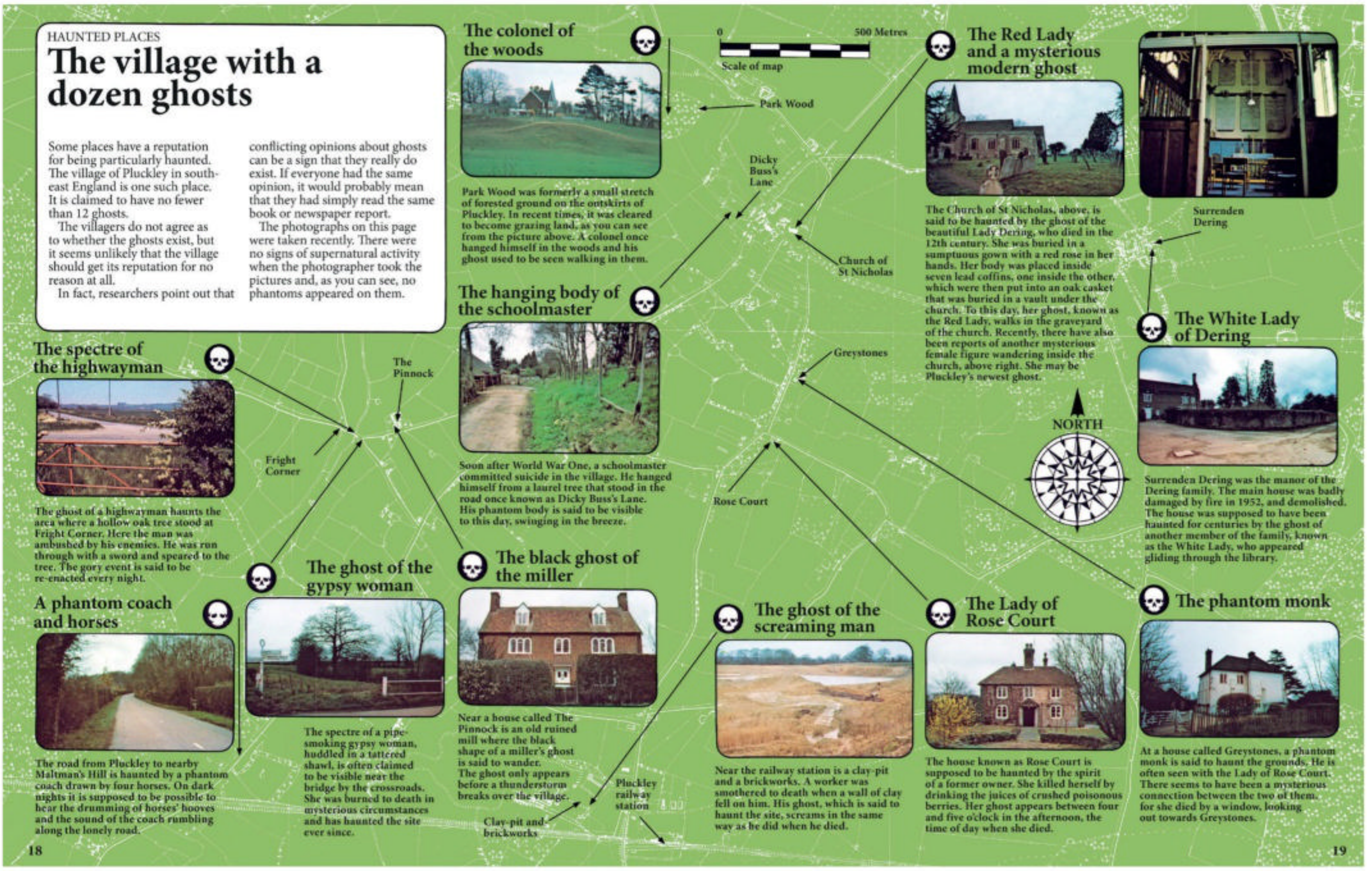
At the beginning of the 1990s my older brother and I managed to convince my parents to take a detour to the village while visiting family in nearby Maidstone. Armed only with Maynard's map as a guide, we rattled around the village on a fruitless ghost hunt, losing a beloved toy in the process but sparking in me a lifelong interest in the village. This fascination deepened when during my teens my dad and I found out his ancestors all hailed from Pluckley. Returning to the genealogical research after my father's death, I became determined to find out not just how the village got its ghostly reputation, but also if there was anything to be learned about the real people behind the stories – not least because one of the ghosts turned out to be a distant cousin…

> ARMED ONLY WITH MAYNARD'S MAP AS A GUIDE, WE RATTLED ROUND THE VILLAGE ON A FRUITLESS GHOST HUNT

THE ORIGINS OF PLUCKLEY'S GHOST STORIES

The earliest widely available books to feature the village's phantoms emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Jack Hallam's *The Ghost Tour* (1967) came first, followed by Peter Underwood's *Gazetteer of British Ghosts* (1971), Andrew Green's *Our Haunted Kingdom* and Antony D Hippisley Coxe's *Haunted Britain* (both 1973), Marc Alexander's *Phantom Britain* (1975), and Maynard's *All About Ghosts* and Eric Maple's *Supernatural England* (both 1977). Pluckley has featured in publica-

ETIENNE GILFILLAN / GRANT NIXON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO


HAUNTED PLACES

The village with a dozen ghosts

Some places have a reputation for being particularly haunted. The village of Pluckley in south-east England is one such place. It is claimed to have no fewer than 12 ghosts.

The villagers do not agree as to whether the ghosts exist, but it seems unlikely that the village should get its reputation for no reason at all.

In fact, researchers point out that conflicting opinions about ghosts can be a sign that they really do exist. If everyone had the same opinion, it would probably mean that they had simply read the same book or newspaper report.

The photographs on this page were taken recently. There were no signs of supernatural activity when the photographer took the pictures and, as you can see, no phantoms appeared on them.

The colonel of the woods

Park Wood was formerly a small stretch of forested ground on the outskirts of Pluckley. In recent times, it was cleared to become grazing land, as you can see from the picture above. A colonel once hanged himself in the woods and his ghost used to be seen walking in them.

The hanging body of the schoolmaster

Soon after World War One, a schoolmaster committed suicide in the village. He hanged himself from a laurel tree that stood in the road once known as Dicky Buss's Lane. His phantom body is said to be visible to this day, swinging in the breeze.

The spectre of the highwayman

The ghost of a highwayman haunts the area where a hollow oak tree stood at Fright Corner. Here the man was ambushed by his enemies. He was run through with a sword and speared to the tree. The gory event is said to be re-enacted every night.

A phantom coach and horses

The road from Pluckley to nearby Maltman's Hill is haunted by a phantom coach drawn by four horses. On dark nights it is supposed to be possible to hear the drumming of horses' hooves and the sound of the coach rumbling along the lonely road.

The ghost of the gypsy woman

The spectre of a pipe-smoking gypsy woman, huddled in a tattered shawl, is often claimed to be visible near the bridge by the crossroads. She was burned to death in mysterious circumstances and has haunted the site ever since.

The black ghost of the miller

Near a house called The Pinnock is an old ruined mill where the black shape of a miller's ghost is said to wander. The ghost only appears before a thunderstorm breaks over the village.

The ghost of the screaming man

Near the railway station is a clay-pit and a brickworks. A worker was smothered to death when a wall of clay fell on him. His ghost, which is said to haunt the site, screams in the same way as he did when he died.

The Red Lady and a mysterious modern ghost

The Church of St Nicholas, above, is said to be haunted by the ghost of the beautiful Lady Dering, who died in the 12th century. She was buried in a sumptuous gown with a red rose in her hands. Her body was placed inside seven lead coffins, one inside the other, which were then put into an oak casket that was buried in a vault under the church. To this day, her ghost, known as the Red Lady, walks in the graveyard of the church. Recently, there have also been reports of another mysterious female figure wandering inside the church, above right. She may be Pluckley's newest ghost.

The White Lady of Dering

Surrenden Dering was the manor of the Dering family. The main house was badly damaged by fire in 1952, and demolished. The house was supposed to have been haunted for centuries by the ghost of another member of the family, known as the White Lady, who appeared gliding through the library.

The Lady of Rose Court

The house known as Rose Court is supposed to be haunted by the spirit of a former owner. She killed herself by drinking the juices of crushed poisonous berries. Her ghost appears between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, the time of day when she died.

The phantom monk

At a house called Greystones, a phantom monk is said to haunt the grounds. He is often seen with the Lady of Rose Court. There seems to have been a mysterious connection between the two of them, for she died by a window, looking out towards Greystones.

18

19

COURTESY USBORNE

ABOVE: The iconic map of the "village with a dozen ghosts" from Usborne's 1977 *World of the Unknown: All About Ghosts*. **BELOW**: Despite *All About Ghosts* helping cement Pluckley's modern reputation as a ghostly hotspot, Alan Bignell's 1981 visit, written up in *Link* magazine, yielded no recent sightings.

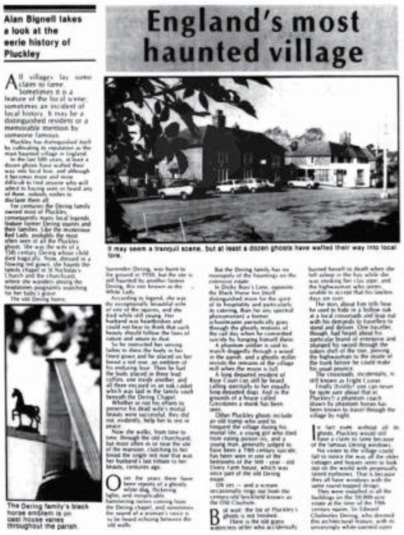
tions on the paranormal ever since, as well as in newspaper articles on travel, real estate, and local interest, TV and radio programmes, and latterly across websites, online messageboards, social media, and podcasts.

The origins of most of the stories recorded in these early publications, however, have been harder to pin down. In 2000, journalist Julia Stuart, visiting the village for *The Independent* newspaper, quoted a local resident as saying that "the Pluckley ghosts have no ancestry at all… If you look in pre-war guidebooks there is no mention of it being the most haunted village in England."[2]

Pluckley's ghosts are indeed absent from a sample of early publications featuring the village.[3] *A Saunter Through Kent with Pen and Pencil* by Charles Igglesden (1924) for example was compiled from a series of newspaper articles first published in the *Kentish Express*, and the 1903 article which features Pluckley discusses ghosts in nearby locations, but not in the village itself.[4]

Pluckley's reputation within materialist parapsychological circles has also been less than stellar, with corroborating sightings or experiences involving the ghosts often conspicuous by their absence. Visiting Pluckley in 1971 for the *News of the World* while reviewing Underwood's book, for example, journalist William Rankine suggested it had been 25 years since anyone claimed to have seen a ghost in the village. Alan Bignell made a similar observation about the village's lack of ghosts, writing that it had become "more and more difficult to find anyone who will admit to having seen or heard any of them,"[5] and more recent visitors have been similarly disappointed.

THERE WAS A MAP OF PLUCKLEY MARKED WITH DESCRIPTIONS OF THE VILLAGE'S PHANTOMS AND THEIR HAUNTS


Alan Bignell takes a look at the eerie history of Pluckley

England's most haunted village

It may seem a tranquil scene, but at least a dozen ghosts have wafted their way into local lore.

The Dering family's black horse emblem is on oast house vanes throughout the parish.

This has led to speculation about the provenance of the stories. An article in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1992 recorded a suggestion that the stories had been concocted in the 1950s by a group of locals.[6] This theory was echoed by a resident who told me that his father believed that the stories began when journalists visiting the Black Horse Inn one evening were told tall tales by residents "possibly in exchange for free beer".

In another twist, TV actor and later BBC Radio 2 DJ Desmond Carrington told Julia Stuart he was responsible for fabricating all but one of the stories: "I lived in Pluckley during the 1950s and while I was in the ITV series *Emergency Ward 10*, a freelance journalist named Bill Evans came to my home to do a feature on me for the *TV Times*. He wanted an 'angle' on the village and asked if there was a ghost. I said I'd heard of one – a 'White Lady' – and we ended up concocting a whole string of them just for the article."

FREDERICK SANDERS: GHOST HUNTER

While it might be tempting to assume that the tales were a product of local fabrication, their origins lie not with Carrington, nor a cartel of intoxicated locals – though they all may have had a hand in the later evolution and promulgation of the tales – but instead in the writing of a local man named Frederick William Thomas Sanders (1908-1996).

Born in Pluckley, Sanders was the son of

BLACK HORSE
OPEN
ALL DAY
Good Food
Wine & Ale
BLACK HORSE

REALIMAGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Black Horse in Pluckley: speculation about the source of the village's numerous ghost stories has sometimes pointed to visiting journalists being told tall tales "possibly in exchange for free beer". **BELOW**: Local ghost hunter Frederick William Thomas Sanders, the real source of many tales of Pluckley's spooks.

Frederick Sr, an RAF Sergeant, and Alice (née Pile). Alice's family hailed from Pluckley, and it was here that the Sanders returned to live in September 1919 during Frederick Snr's military service at RAF Uxbridge. Frederick Jr left school at around 15 years of age, going on to work at a poultry farm, before eventually moving to Chatham where he worked in the dockyards. It was during this period that he wrote books on Kentish local dialects, graveyards and natural history. He was an avid correspondent with the local press, frequently penning letters on matters of dialect and nicknames, as well as writing obituaries for residents. Crucially, he was also from a young age an enthusiast of the paranormal and styled himself a 'ghost hunter,' and it was a combination of this esoteric interest with his work as an amateur historian and memoirist that generated the first written accounts of any of Pluckley's ghosts.

Sanders began 'ghost hunting' in 1939. He carried out two hunts at St Nicholas Church in Pluckley in 1939 in search of the 'Red Lady', one of which was covered at the time by a journalist from *The Daily Herald* in what appears to be the first mention of any of Pluckley's ghosts in print. The feature was published on Monday 24 July 1939.[7]

In 1946 he wrote and self-published *Psychical Research: Haunted Kent*, a type-written account of 14 ghost hunts he conducted in the county between February 1939 and December 1940. While Sanders includes an account of his hunts at St Nicholas, he omits to mention the visit from a reporter. This small volume, printed in very small numbers, was followed by a letter to the *Kentish Express* on 13 February 1948 to discuss the matter of owls being mistaken for ghosts on Mill Hill.

COURTESY SANDERS FAMILY

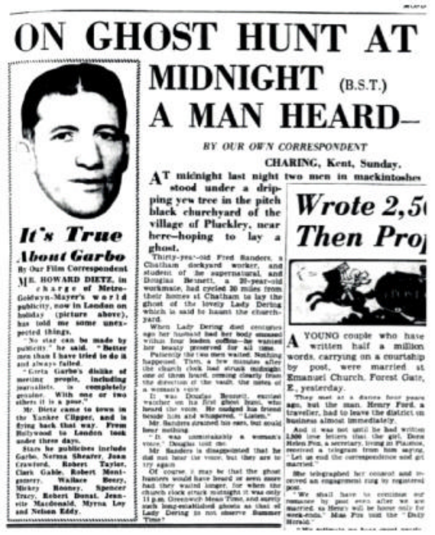
It was in a 1950 article by Sanders for the same newspaper that really launched the village's reputation as an epicentre for hauntings.[8] In it, he lists 10 ghosts (or more accurately, nine ghosts and Satan himself, summoned by dancing three times around the aptly named 'Devil's Bush'). Sanders also describes Pluckley as the "most haunted village in England" in what is almost certainly the first instance of the term being associated with the village.

Sanders's interests in ghost deepened, and he sporadically wrote paranormally inclined fiction for the *Kentish Express* during the 1950s and 1960s. It was during this period that that he released his 1955 memoir, *Pluckley Was My Playground,* in which he details his childhood and teenage exploits in the village between 1919 and 1926.[9] The book, self-published in a very small edition and distributed to friends, family, and local libraries, was assembled from notes first written by Sanders between 1927 and 1931. It is a nostalgic memoir, full of recollections of life in an idyllic, rural England: tramping through fields, exploring ponds and forests, playing games and building dens, documenting local flora and fauna, remembering local characters – and ghost stories.

GHOSTLY ORIGINS

It is from this handful of sources that it is possible to begin unpicking the origins of Pluckley's ghost stories and charting their early evolution.

In *Pluckley Was My Playground* Sanders credits his grandfather, Jesse Pile, with the first of two stories associated with the Dering family, landed gentry who had owned much of Pluckley and its surrounds for hundreds of years. This story – "closely guarded" for many years by the Pile family – relates to the



ON GHOST HUNT AT MIDNIGHT (B.S.T.) A MAN HEARD—

BY OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

CHARING, Kent, Sunday.

AT midnight last night two men in mackintoshes stood under a dripping yew tree in the pitch black churchyard of the village of Pluckley, near here—hoping to lay a ghost.

Thirty-year-old Fred Sanders, a Chatham dockyard worker, and student of the supernatural, and Douglas Bennett, a 20-year-old workmate, had cycled 30 miles from their homes at Chatham to lay the ghost of the lovely Lady Dering which is said to haunt the churchyard.

When Lady Dering died centuries ago her husband had her body encased within four leaden coffins—he wanted her beauty preserved for all time.

Patiently the two men waited. Nothing happened. Then, a few minutes after the church clock had struck midnight one of them heard, coming clearly from the direction of the vault, the notes of a woman's voice.

It was Douglas Bennett, excited watcher on his first ghost hunt, who heard the voice. He nudged his friend beside him and whispered, "Listen."

Mr. Sanders strained his ears, but could hear nothing.

"It was unmistakably a woman's voice," Douglas told me.

Mr. Sanders is disappointed that he did not hear the voice, but they are to try again.

Of course, it may be that the ghost hunters would have heard or seen more had they waited longer, for when the church clock struck midnight it was only 11 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time, and surely such long-established ghosts as that of Lady Dering do not observe Summer Time?

It's True About Garbo

By Our Film Correspondent

MR. HOWARD DIETZ, in charge of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's world publicity, now in London on holiday (picture above), has told me some unexpected things.

"No star can be made by publicity," he said. "Better men than I have tried to do it and always failed.

"Greta Garbo's dislike of meeting people, including journalists, is completely genuine. With one or two others it is a pose."

Mr. Dietz came to town in the Yankee Clipper, and is flying back that way. From Hollywood to London took under three days.

Stars he publicises include Garbo, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Robert Taylor, Clark Gable, Robert Montgomery, Wallace Beery, Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracy, Robert Donat, Jeanette Macdonald, Myrna Loy and Nelson Eddy.

Wrote 2,5 Then Pro

A YOUNG couple who have written half a million words, carrying on a courtship by post, were married at Emanuel Church, Forest Gate, E., yesterday.

They met at a dance four years ago, but the man, Henry Ford, a traveller, had to leave the district on business almost immediately.

And it was not until he had written 1,500 love letters that the girl, Dora Helen Fox, a secretary, living in Plaistow, received a telegram from him saying: "Let us end the correspondence and get married."

She telegraphed her consent and received an engagement ring by registered post.

"We shall have to continue our romance by post even after we are married, as Henry will be home only for week-ends," Miss Fox told the "Daily Herald."

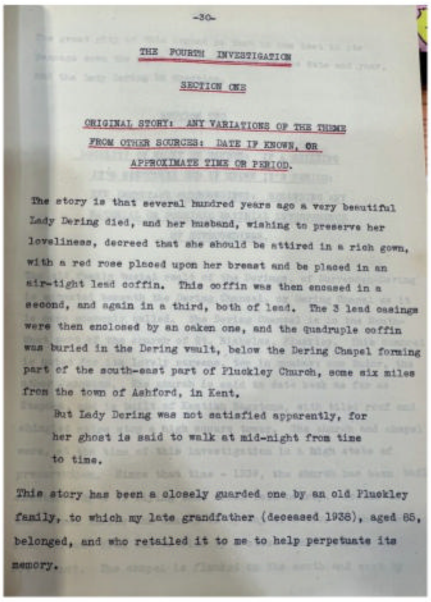
ABOVE: A 1939 story in the *Daily Herald* about Sanders staking out St Nicholas churchyard (right) appears to be the earliest reference to Pluckley's ghosts in print. **BELOW**: Sanders's typewritten 1946 account of his ghost hunts in *Haunted Kent*.

SIMON MORETON

haunting of St Nicholas Church. Sanders writes that "several hundreds of years ago" the exceptionally beautiful Lady Dering died and was buried by her grieving husband, who placed a red rose on her chest and encased her in a coffin made of seven layers of lead. She was interred in the family vault at the village church and, Sanders claimed, could still be seen wandering the graveyard.

In his 1950 article Sanders refers to her as 'The Red Lady' and in *Haunted Kent* he describes the two trips he made to investigate this haunting. The first he carried out in July 1939 with Douglas Bennett, a 20-year-old colleague, and the second he undertook alone in October of the same year. He writes that on his first visit to St Nicholas he saw lights in the belfry and records Bennett hearing a woman's voice in the churchyard – although these details do not appear in the newspaper article produced by the visiting reporter. On his second trip, Sanders noted auditory phenomena inside the church itself. He went on to declare in 1959 that the 'Red Lady' had been laid after a visit to the churchyard by a local ghost-hunting group, the spirit having "escaped through a woman member of the party, who gave this release at grave danger to herself".[10]

Sanders also alleged a 'White Lady' haunted the site of Surrenden Dering, the Dering family seat. The mansion burned down in 1952, but in the 1900s it was being leased to Walter Winans, an American game hunter, Olympic champion shooter, and millionaire. According to Sanders, Winans sat up one night in his library, "to try to lay the ghost of the White Lady" and "he did encounter this famous county apparition, firing his revolver at her, the bullets passing through her wraithlike form as she disappeared through a shelf on the walls".[11]



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THE FOURTH INVESTIGATION

SECTION ONE

ORIGINAL STORY: ANY VARIATIONS OF THE THEME FROM OTHER SOURCES: DATE IF KNOWN, OR APPROXIMATE TIME OR PERIOD.

The story is that several hundred years ago a very beautiful Lady Dering died, and her husband, wishing to preserve her loveliness, decreed that she should be attired in a rich gown, with a red rose placed upon her breast and be placed in an air-tight lead coffin. This coffin was then encased in a second, and again in a third, both of lead. The 3 lead casings were then enclosed by an oaken one, and the quadruple coffin was buried in the Dering vault, below the Dering Chapel forming part of the south-east part of Pluckley Church, some six miles from the town of Ashford, in Kent.

But Lady Dering was not satisfied apparently, for her ghost is said to walk at mid-night from time to time.

This story has been a closely guarded one by an old Pluckley family, to which my late grandfather (deceased 1938), aged 85, belonged, and who retailed it to me to help perpetuate its memory.

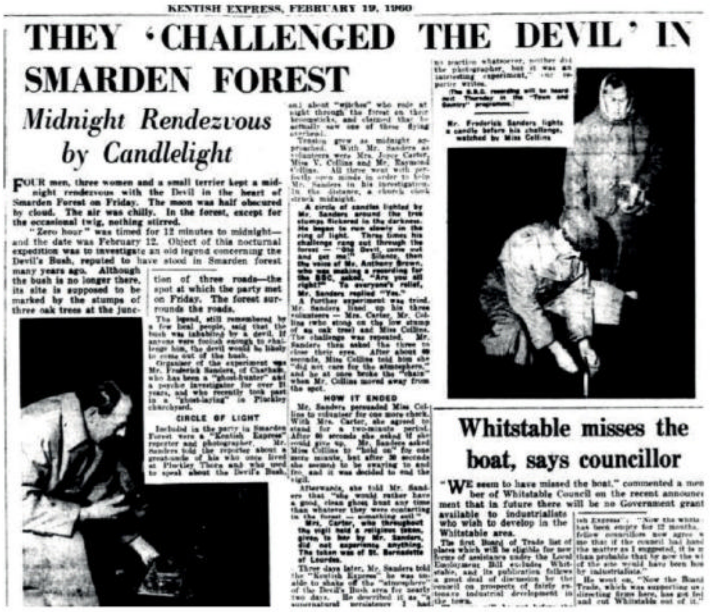
REBECCA LAMBERT

Sanders does not record his source for this story, but a letter written by a man named Mark Tiffen to the *Kentish Express* in 1959 implies that the story was known locally. He reported that his mother had worked at the manor at the time of Winan's encounter and she had told her son that "several visitors packed and left hurriedly on being told of the appearance of this lady. She was alleged to have gone to the nurseries to bid her children goodnight when she slipped and fell, crashing to her death at the foot of the nursery staircase".[12]

The next ghost first recorded by Sanders is that of a figure dressed sometimes in white and sometimes in black reputed to haunt the site of Pluckley's old mill. The windmill was built in 1820 on a hill overlooking the village and was used for most of its life to grind cereals. It was struck by lightning on 16 August 1831, but subsequently rebuilt. According to Sanders, it was again out of commission by the 1920s, after which time he writes that the miller, Richard 'Dicky' Buss was using the building as a storehouse. The building finally burned down after another lightning strike in April 1939.[13]

Sanders does not provide a source for this tale, but his 1948 letter on the matter of owls being mistaken for ghosts in the remains of the mill implies that he was attempting to debunk a locally established legend; although this scepticism is not present in his 1950 article, in which he unambiguously refers to a ghostly miller, it returns in his memoir. Here he describes how once, when he and his friends were rooting around in the old building, something grasped the hand of one of his companions. This turned out not to be a ghost but instead a bird trap with its jaws wrapped in cloth belonging to the millers' son, Charles – known as 'Dusty' to Sanders and his friends. Dusty trapped and trained birds; the device that caught Sanders' friend was designed to safely capture owls which Dusty would then domesticate and sell.

Two further stories recorded by Sanders are less detailed. The first was 'The Colonel', who was alleged to have hanged himself in Park Wood. This features in Sanders's memoir as a story given to him by his schoolteacher, Henry Turff. Sanders claimed that when he was young villagers would avoid a path through the woods at night on account of their fear of the Colonel's spectre. The second was 'The Highwayman', whose story Sanders tells in *Pluckley Was My Playground.* The legend he reported was of that of a highwayman, supposedly killed by locals in the hollow oak from which he used to ambush passers-by. Although Sanders details his own adventures climbing the tree in his memoir, he mentions no ghost: it was only in his 1950



KENTISH EXPRESS, FEBRUARY 19, 1960

THEY 'CHALLENGED THE DEVIL' IN SMARDEN FOREST

Midnight Rendezvous by Candlelight

FOUR men, three women and a small terrier kept a midnight rendezvous with the Devil in the heart of Smarden Forest on Friday. The moon was half obscured by cloud. The air was chilly. In the forest, except for the occasional twig, nothing stirred.

"Zero hour" was timed for 12 minutes to midnight—and the date was February 12. Object of this nocturnal expedition was to investigate an old legend concerning the Devil's Bush, reputed to have stood in Smarden forest many years ago. Although the bush is no longer there, its site is supposed to be marked by the stumps of three oak trees at the junction of three roads—the spot at which the party met on Friday. The forest surrounds the roads.

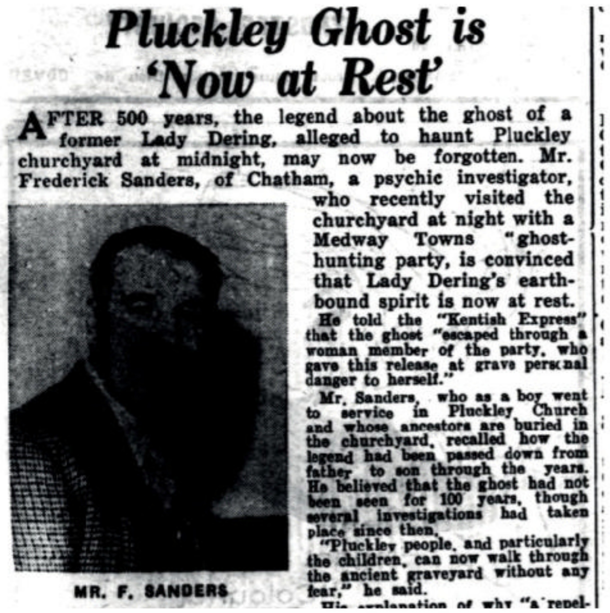
CIRCLE OF LIGHT

HOW IT ENDED

Mr. Frederick Sanders lights a candle before his challenge, watched by Miss Collins

Whitstable misses the boat, says councillor

"WE seem to have missed the boat," commented a member of Whitstable Council on the recent announcement that in future there will be no Government grant available to industrialists who wish to develop in the Whitstable area.



Pluckley Ghost is 'Now at Rest'

AFTER 500 years, the legend about the ghost of a former Lady Dering, alleged to haunt Pluckley churchyard at midnight, may now be forgotten. Mr. Frederick Sanders, of Chatham, a psychic investigator, who recently visited the churchyard at night with a Medway Towns "ghost-hunting party, is convinced that Lady Dering's earth-bound spirit is now at rest.

He told the "Kentish Express" that the ghost "escaped through a woman member of the party, who gave this release at grave personal danger to herself."

Mr. Sanders, who as a boy went to service in Pluckley Church and whose ancestors are buried in the churchyard, recalled how the legend had been passed down from father to son through the years. He believed that the ghost had not been seen for 100 years, though several investigations had taken place since then.

"Pluckley people, and particularly the children, can now walk through the ancient graveyard without any fear," he said.

MR. F. SANDERS

ABOVE: *Kentish Express* stories concerning the Devil's Bush (1960) and the laying of Lady Dering's ghost (1959). **BELOW:** A report from the *Kentish Express*, 22 Dec 1950, about the 'White Lady' of Surrenden Dering. **BOTTOM:** Millionaire hunter Walter Winans, who allegedly saw the White Lady while leasing the mansion.

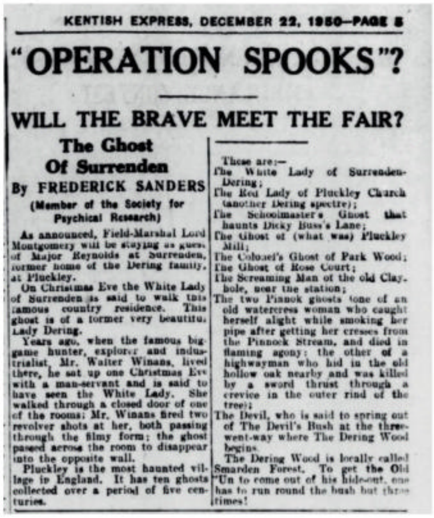
article that he connects a haunting to the legend, and once more no source is given.

The 1950 article also includes details of the 'Devil's Bush', the remains of a tree or shrub that stood at the eastern edge of nearby Dering Woods. Sanders claimed that dancing around the stump a number of times, while chanting the appropriate rhyme, would lead to the appearance of the Devil. A local resident also confirmed that this story predated Sanders, claiming that his parents had told him in the 1950s that if "you went round this stump three times backwards the Devil would come out and get you."

THE LADY OF ROSE COURT AND OTHER PHANTOMS

The four remaining stories recorded by Sanders commemorate events that occurred within the village in the 60 years or so preceding his arrival in 1919. The earliest of these relates to the 'Lady of Rose Court', a spectral woman alleged to haunt a large house just north of the Brick and Tile Works. This appears to have been first recorded by Sanders in 1950. Later retellings suggest that the woman lived and died in Tudor times and frequently characterise her as the mistress of a member of the Dering family who took her own life with poison.[14] In some stories, the poison comes from crushed ivy berries.

There *was* a suicide at Rose Court, or Rose Cottage as it was known at the time, albeit much later than the Tudor period. Mary Ann Bennett died at the property on 8 August 1862, after taking an overdose of opium. Her father, George Ellerton High, appeared at the inquest into her death, testifying that "the deceased was… aged 31 years. She has suffered from disease of the brain for two years past… Yesterday morning, a little before four o'clock, she came into my bedroom, and took from a drawer… a bottle containing a small quantity of opium. After that she continued in a sleepy state until about 20 minutes before three in the afternoon, when she died."[15]



KENTISH EXPRESS, DECEMBER 22, 1950—PAGE 5

"OPERATION SPOOKS"?

WILL THE BRAVE MEET THE FAIR?

The Ghost Of Surrenden

By FREDERICK SANDERS

(Member of the Society for Psychical Research)

As announced, Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery will be staying as guest of Major Reynolds at Surrenden, former home of the Dering family, at Pluckley.

On Christmas Eve the White Lady of Surrenden is said to walk this famous country residence. This ghost is of a former very beautiful Lady Dering.

Years ago, when the famous big-game hunter, explorer and industrialist, Mr. Walter Winans, lived there, he sat up one Christmas Eve with a man-servant and is said to have seen the White Lady. She walked through a closed door of one of the rooms; Mr. Winans fired two revolver shots at her, both passing through the filmy form; the ghost passed across the room to disappear into the opposite wall.

Pluckley is the most haunted village in England. It has ten ghosts collected over a period of five centuries.

These are:—

The White Lady of Surrenden-Dering;

The Red Lady of Pluckley Church (another Dering spectre);

The Schoolmaster's Ghost that haunts Dicky Buss's Lane;

The Ghost of (what was) Pluckley Mill;

The Colonel's Ghost of Park Wood;

The Ghost of Rose Court;

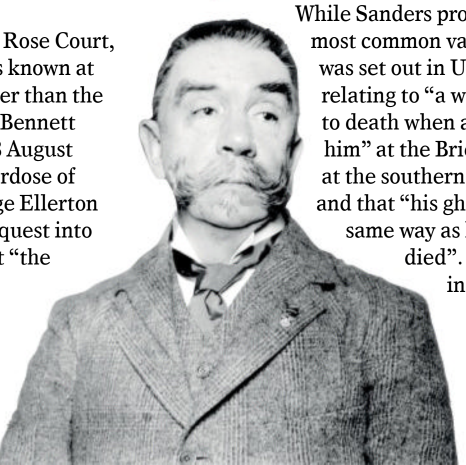
The Screaming Man of the old Clay-hole, near the station;

The two Pinnock ghosts (one of an old watercress woman who caught herself alight while smoking her pipe after getting her cresses from the Pinnock Stream, and died in flaming agony; the other of a highwayman who hid in the old hollow oak nearby and was killed by a sword thrust through a crevice in the outer rind of the tree);

The Devil, who is said to spring out of The Devil's Bush at the three-went-way where The Dering Wood begins.

The Dering Wood is locally called Smarden Forest. To get the Old 'Un to come out of his hide-out, one has to run round the bush but three times!

The second story based on documented events, and which makes its first appearances in Sanders's 1950 *Kentish Express* article, is the 'Screaming Man of the old Clay-Pit'. While Sanders provides no details, the most common variant of the story was set out in Usborne's *Ghosts*, as relating to "a worker… smothered to death when a wall of clay fell on him" at the Brick and Tile Works at the southern edge of the village, and that "his ghost… screams the same way as he did when he died". A corresponding incident occurred at the end of the 19th century. On Wednesday 11 January 1899, Richard Bridgland, 35 years of age, was with two companions digging clay from a pit when a portion of the wall fell on him, in what a local paper described as "the first accident to occur in the 23 years since the brickworks had been open."[16] Bridgland was quickly dug out, but was found to have broken his neck. His death was ruled an accident. He left behind a wife, and five young children.



The third story related to the death of a local woman in 1911. Sanders writes in *Pluckley Was My Playground* that "within the memory of my Grandmother Pile, an old lady who sold watercress to the people of the nearby villages caught herself afire by the bridge… and was burnt to death" and that "on the anniversary of her sad and shocking end it was said that her ghost appeared wrapped in flames and screaming for help!" Sanders does not make any reference to the identity of this woman, but the *Faversham News* reported on 19 August 1911 that "a shocking fatality occurred between Smarden and Pluckley… the unfortunate victim being an aged watercress seller, named Sarah Sharp, whose charred body was found by the roadside and whose clothing… had been accidentally ignited, probably from a smouldering tobacco pipe."

The final story was that of the 'Hanging Schoolmaster'. Sanders explains that shortly before his family's return to Pluckley a decaying body was found hanging in a crop of bay laurel trees on the path to Mill Hill, also known to Sanders as 'Dicky Buss' Lane'. He writes, again in his memoir, that, "to these great and gloomy evergreens a terrible happening clung," explaining that "they became known, in the year 1919, as the 'Haunted Laurels', on account of a schoolmaster of [nearby village] Smarden having

MALMAINS ROAD

BENNETT
Also of
Also of

SIMON MORETON

ABOVE LEFT: Rose Court, previously known as Rose Cottage; according to some versions of the ghost story, it was haunted by a Tudor woman who had taken her own life with poison. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The grave of Mary Ann Bennett, the real Lady of Rose Court, who committed suicide by drinking opium in 1862. **BELOW**: TV actor and BBC Radio DJ Desmond Carrington lived in Pluckley in the 1950s and claimed he was responsible for fabricating all but one of the ghost stories.

committed suicide by hanging himself in that darksome grove. He was missing for several weeks until one evening, old Richard Buss, happened to go through the Laurels and was 'kicked' in the face by the suspended thing that had once been a man."

Sanders records that Henry Turff claimed to have known the man who died in Pluckley in 1919, whom he said was a schoolmaster who often walked the three miles from Smarden to drink and "discourse upon logic" with him at the Black Horse Inn.

There was a suicide at the same time and under the same circumstances described by Sanders, except that the man who died was neither from Smarden, nor was he a schoolteacher. His name was Henry Edgar Martin, and he was a local papermaker. Martin's death certificate confirms that he had taken his own life in early August in the same place, at the same time, and under the same circumstances, as those described by Sanders, having died by "strangulation by hanging by a halter from a tree".[17]

The confusion around Martin's occupation stemmed from Sanders's conflation in *Pluckley Was My Playground* of the circumstances surrounding Martin's death with those of another, later, suicide. An article in the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* on 28 August 1923 reported that a Smarden schoolmaster – the similarly named Harry Martin – had taken his own life due to being "depressed at having to leave the village where all his friends lived, to undergo hospital treatment in London," drowning himself in a pond in Smarden "whilst of unsound mind." [18] It appears that Turff was speaking about Harry Martin – and not Henry Edgar Martin – and that Sanders had accidentally amalgamated the two stories into one during the composition of his memoir.

BILL EVANS WROTE A PIECE FOR *KENTISH LIFE* IN 1964 WHICH LARGELY REHASHES CARRINGTON'S 1962 ARTICLE

PLUCKLEY'S GROWING REPUTATION

Sanders's stories found a receptive local audience in the period after the release of his memoir. He led at least two 'ghost hunts', the first of which was in 1959 with members of a local ghost club and the second in February 1960 in Smarden Wood, of which a recording was made to feature on the BBC Radio 4 'Town and Country' programme later that same month.[19] This local interest soon turned national with The *Kentish Express* on Friday 19 January 1962, recording that "cameramen from the BBC television studios were in [Pluckley] last week-end filming sequences for a 'Tonight' article – which was screened later in the week – on the Pluckley ghosts. Last year the village was featured in a radio programme, and ITV cameramen have already visited the village once this year."

Desmond Carrington's article followed in the 1962 *TV Times Christmas Extra*, a seasonal edition of the magazine compiling articles, TV-themed games, and other ephemera. The article fits the description given by Carrington to Julia Stuart and is a light-hearted, wry narrative about a walk around Pluckley in which Carrington recounts 11 ghost stories. Despite his later assertions, these are largely retellings of those already reported by Sanders – the Red and White Ladies, the Hanging Schoolmaster, the Lady of Rose Court, the Screaming Man, the Miller, the Watercress Lady, and the Highway Man. Carrington adds only three stories here – the ghosts of a Phantom Coach and Horses heard in local lanes, a Monk at a property called Greystones whom Carrington associated with the Lady of Rose Court, and a poltergeist at Surrenden Dering. Given his later confession, it seems that his three additions were fabrications.

Bill Evans, whom Carrington named as his accomplice, wrote a piece for *Kentish Life* in April 1964 which largely rehashes Carrington's article. Next came Jack Hallam's *Ghost Tour* in 1967, which in addi-

OLD MILL PLUCKLEY

FLYBY PHOTOGRAPHY WWW.FLYBYPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Pluckley's old mill in 1914. It was reputedly haunted by a ghostly figure in white (or sometimes black). Having been struck by lightning in 1831 and subsequently rebuilt, it finally burned down following another lightning strike in 1939. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Sanders's explorations of Dering Woods, apparently once home to the fabled 'Devil's Bush', left him with a feeling of unease of "a persistency I had never, in over 21 years of psychical research, encountered before."

tion to Sanders's stories included the phantom stagecoach and poltergeist at Surrenden Dering Manor, both almost certainly derived from Carrington. Peter Underwood's *Gazetteer of British Ghosts* followed suit, featuring both Sanders's and Hallam's stories, with two additions – a poltergeist at the Black Horse Inn and a woman in contemporary dress in St Nicholas churchyard.

The 1971 Pluckley Fair, held on Saturday 14 August, featured "Wrestling, Clay Pigeon shoot, and Ghosts", the latter provided in the form of the premiere of a film called *Some Pluckley Ghosts* made by amateur dramatics society the 'Pluckley Players' under the direction of a local man named Basil Cowles. The film, made to raise money for the village hall, was a light-hearted affair.[20] It featured most of Sanders's ghosts, played by actors in period costumes with a degree of camp and knowing humour. [21] Shot on 8mm film, *Some Pluckley Ghosts* was apparently so widely shown that the print was worn out.

The account of a poltergeist at the Black Horse Inn mentioned by Underwood reappeared in the *Kentish Express* in January 1973 when then-landlady Peggy Whiting described items being transported around the pub, and a vase flying across the saloon bar. The article links the haunting to the murder of a woman with a bowling pin "more than 100 years ago".[22] Never one to miss a trick when it came to Kentish ghosts, Sanders wrote to the paper the same month to name the murdered individual as Miss Jean Spicer, whom he stated died on 20 May 1772.[23] Although Sanders had the date right, the deceased was in fact a man named Jesse Spicer, and he was the victim of an accident, not foul play. The *Kentish Gazette* explained at the time that "a melancholy accident happened in the nine-pin-yard at the Black-horse at Pluckley, where two men were going to the bowl for a wager, when one of them had the misfortune to hit a byestander [sic] (one Mr. Spicer) a violent blow on the head".[24] Spicer died at home later that evening and according to parish burial records was buried six days later.[25]

Another ghost-hunt, this time organised by a London-based group, was held on 17 March 1973, with participants travelling from Charing Cross to Pluckley for an afternoon tour of 12 haunts – the 10 described by Sanders, as well as the newer additions of the phantom stagecoach and the ghostly monk. A few months later, Ashford Hospital's Broadcasting Service recorded an hour-long documentary about the village which included recordings of a 'ghost hunt' held by the producers on a Friday night in July in St Nicholas churchyard.[26]

Andrew Green's *Our Haunted Kingdom* was published in the same month and was the next book to provide an account of Pluckley's ghosts. Green added the story of a poltergeist at a property called Elvey Farm to the village's roster and is the second author – after Carrington – to record the story of the ghostly monk at Greystones.

The Elvey Farm poltergeist story came directly to Andrew Green from a resident at the property. Alan Ambrose described objects moving of their own free will and stated that his wife had seen an apparition of a Victorian man lying on a bed. Green links the haunting to a suicide at the property in which "a tenant farmer shot himself in the old dairy in the 1850s due to an overpowering feeling of depression at losing his wife and failure in his business".[27] He notes Ambrose did not believe there was a link between this event and his own encounters, but two of the property's later owners – who turned the farm into a hotel in 2007 – were interviewed for BBC Radio 4 series *Open Country* in 2010 and linked their paranormal experiences at the property to the suicide of farmer named Edward John Brett. Brett took his own life at Elvey Farm on 10 January 1900. He was 29 years of age, and according to his death certificate, died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.[28] Whether or not Green was referring to this suicide, or another one at the same property, is not clear.

Antony Hippisley Coxe's *Haunted Britain* followed in the latter half of 1973, containing the same stories as Green, but without his additions of the poltergeists at Elvey Farm and Black Horse Inn. A paperback edition of Green's book followed in 1974, and Marc Alexander's *Phantom Britain* was published in 1975. Alexander added no new ghosts, and although the book did not mention the Elvey Farm haunting, it otherwise reproduced the earlier stories.

In January 1977 an article in the national tabloid newspaper the *Sunday People* suggested that ghosts were responsible for a spate of relationship breakups in the village – including the end of Black Horse Inn's landlady Peggy Whiting's marriage.[29] Later that same year came the publication of Eric Maple's *Supernatural England* and Usborne's *All About Ghosts,* the latter cementing the village's reputation for 'the haunted generation.'

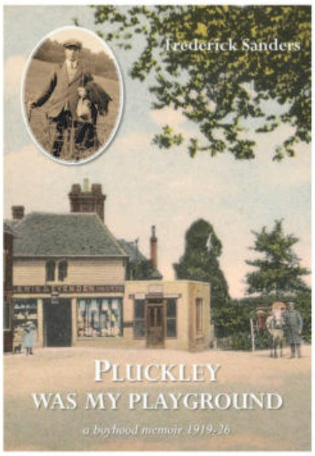
By the beginning of the 1980s, there were at least 17 ghost stories connected to the village, the Black Horse was advertising itself as being "famous for its help yourself cold buffets, open log fires, and ghosts" [30] and national press attention had established the reputation of the village as a destination for curious tourists and dedicated ghost-hunters alike.

SIMON MORETON

ABOVE: The Dering family vault in the churchyard of St Nicholas, Pluckley. **BELOW**: Frederick Sanders’s 1955 memoir was republished in 2021.

THE SANDERS LEGACY

Although archival research can be slippery – it only takes one newly discovered piece of evidence to trip up even the soundest of historical explanations – it is almost certain that Sanders was the first to record these stories, and definitely the first to popularise Pluckley as a ‘haunted village’. The stories themselves are a mixture of familial lore, local hearsay, and personal inventions – the fact there are no stories featuring a ‘Hanging Papermaker’ as a corrective to Sanders’s reporting error suggests that Sanders was the only person spinning a yarn about a ghost in the laurels on Mill Hill and with the exception of Walter Winans,[31] he is the only person in his accounts to have actually had a supernatural encounter – and even then he debunked his own earlier experiences with the ‘Red Lady’ in the same 1946 book in which he reported them!



There were other storytellers, of course. The 1992 *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper article names a local man, Stan Pile as a source – though it’s not clear what stories he told. Similarly, a correspondent informed me of villagers experiencing other ghostly encounters in the 1970s, including a “whispering kitchen ghost”, a “curly haired apparition” and a figure drifting through walls in the cottages situated at the gate to St Nicholas Church.

There is also the later account of a phantom hitchhiker picked up outside the village, and an encounter with a white dog in the churchyard. Yet most of the anomalous experiences associated with the village have adhered to the core narrative frameworks established by Sanders (and Carrington) in the 1950s and 1960s, and errors made by Sanders (such as his muddling of Henry Edgar Martin and Harry Martin) remain in the record today.

Sanders’s recording of these stories also captures his evolving worldview. At first, he seems to have subscribed to a scientifically inclined approach to ghost-hunting; both *Haunted Kent*, which sought to unpick and explain any anomalous experiences in great detail, and his 1948 letter, which offered plausible rational explanations for an implied local legend were suggestive of a broadly rationalist approach. Within a short space of time, however, his correspondence with the local press began to hint at a growing inclination towards a Spiritualist position. This was visible particularly in his 1959 ghost hunt in which he claimed the Red Lady’s spirit had been “released” via a brief possession of a member of his party, or his 1960 exploration in Dering Woods which left him with a feeling of unease that he described as exhibiting “a persistency I had never, in over 21 years of psychical research, encountered before.”

Pluckley’s residents continue to navigate the legacy of Sanders’s work even now. When the *Open Country* team from BBC Radio 4 visited Pluckley in 2010, it found local opinion divided on the matter of its ghosts; while some residents felt the village’s renown was harmless, others felt it drew unwanted attention. This was particularly true at Hallowe’en-time in the early 1990s when rowdy thrill-seekers and ghost-hunters descended upon the village, trespassing and causing damage to local property.

Whatever his motivations or inspirations, it’s a curiosity of contemporary folklore that Frederick Sanders’s passion for these stories was able to shape – for better or worse – the public identity of a whole village.

And, as for my ancestral connection, that would be none other than the Watercress Woman, Sarah Sharp, my third cousin five times removed! [32]

SIMON MORETON is an artist and writer with a lifelong interest in forteana, particularly where it relates to folklore and local history. His experimental memoir *WHERE?* (Little Toller, 2021) explores the unexpected links between landscape, grief, history, folklore, and unusual happenings that appeared in the aftermath of his father’s death in 2017. By day he is Associate Professor of Creative Economies at UWE Bristol.

This article is an edited version of “Laying Pluckley’s Ghosts: Frederick Sanders and the Origins of the ‘Most Haunted Village in England’, 1939-79” first published in *Folklore* in March 2025 and available to read at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0015587X.2024.2425199

REALIMAGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Today, the residents of Pluckley are divided on the matter of the the village's ghosts, which can bring unwanted attention – particularly at Hallowe'en.

NOTES

1 Website Higgy Pop points out the village was never accorded an actual World Record, rather that it was featured as a curio for its interesting but fundamentally unverifiable claim https://bit.ly/3v1VQfH

2 Julia Stuart, "Is There Anybody Out There?", *Independent*, 27 Oct 2000.

3 For example, Reverend Ashton Oxenden's (1891) autobiography *A History of My Life* in which he writes about his 20 years as vicar of Pluckley, and travel books such as *Highways and Byways in Kent* by Walter Jerrold (1907), and *Unknown Kent* by Donald Maxwell (1921).

4 Charles Igglesden, "A Saunter through Kent with Pen and Pencil: Biddenden (continued)", *Kentish Express*, 25 April 1903.

5 Alan Bignell, *Kent Lore: A Heritage of Fact and Fable*, London: R Hale, 1983.

6 Ross Clark, "The Darling Ghosts of May", *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 Sept 1992.

7 In the article, the reporter comments on Sanders's apparent lack of success in observing a ghost, stating glibly that "it may be that the ghost hunters would have heard or seen more had they waited longer, for when the church clock struck midnight it was only 11pm. Greenwich Mean Time, and surely such long-established ghosts as that of Lady Dering do not observe Summer Time?"

8 Frederick WT Sanders, 'Operation Spooks?' *Kentish Express*, 22 Dec 1950.

9 Frederick WT Sanders, *Pluckley Was My Playground*, 1955. The book was republished by Canterley Publishing in 2021; see **FT409:62** for a review.

10 "Pluckley Ghost is 'Now at Rest'", *Kentish Express*, 20 Nov 1959.

11 *Pluckley was my Playground*, pp.176-177.

12 Mark Tiffen, "The Pluckley 'Ghost'", *Kentish Express*, 27 Nov 1959.

13 See 'Freak Storm', *Kentish Express*, 29 April 1939, for local reporting on the event. Film footage of the aftermath, taken by an amateur filmmaker in 1939, can be viewed at: https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/1104/

14 D Chambers, *Haunted Pluckley "Most Haunted Village in Kent"*, Self-published pamphlet, 1984.

15 "Inquest at Pluckley", *Kentish Chronicle*, 16 Aug 1862.

16 "Killed by a Fall of Earth", *Canterbury Journal, Kentish Times and Farmers' Gazette*, 21 Jan 1899. There had also been a slightly more unusual death at the Brick and Tile Works just over a year before. Fifty-one year old George Robert Miles, a foreman on the site, died on 7 March 1898. The *Liverpool Echo* reported on 11 March that Miles was found at the clay pits in the early morning, dead, and quite naked; "How the man came into the open air in the nude is a mystery, but it is conjectured that he must have left his home in a somnambulistic state after having divested himself of his night clothing, and, lying on the ground, succumbed to the extreme cold."

17 Henry Edgar Martin, certified copy of death certificate, 18 Aug 1919. GRO REF 1919 S Quarter in West Ashford, vol. 2A, p. 814.

18 Harry Martin, certified copy of death certificate, 27 Aug 1923. GRO REF 1923 S Quarter in West Ashford, vol. 2A, p. 846

19 "They 'Challenged the Devil by Candlelight' in Smarden Forest", *Kentish Express*, 19 Feb 1960.

20 A contemporary article reports how "a lorry was passing as an actor popped out of the bush in a cloud of smoke, and the driver nearly went through the windscreen as he jammed on his brakes" – see Colin Wills, "A Haunting We Will Go… in Britain's Most Spooky Village", *Sunday Mirror*, 12 Oct 1975.

21 "The Village that Haunts Itself", *Evening News*, 13 Aug 1971.

22 "The Ghost that Prefers Black", *Kentish Express*, 12 Jan 1973.

23 Frederick WT Sanders, "Ghost Story Stems from 1772", *Kentish Express*, 26 Jan 1973.

24 "Canterbury", *Kentish Gazette*, 23 May 1772.

25 Jesse Spicer, St Nicholas Church, Pluckley, 26 May 1772, P289/1/E/1.

26 "Ghost Hunt at Midnight", *Kentish Express*, 27 July 1973.

27 Andrew Green, *Our Haunted Kingdom*, 1973, p.150.

28 Edward John Brett, certified copy of death certificate, 10 Jan 1900. GRO REF 1900 M Quarter in West Ashford, vol. 2A, p. 685.

29 F Thorne, "Phantom Marriage Wrecker!", *Sunday People*, 30 Jan 1977.

30 Advertisement in *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 19 Jan 1979. Notably, later that same year an advertisement for the same pub fails to mention ghosts but does stress that the establishment is now under new management (*Maidstone Telegraph*, 9 Nov 1979).

31 Winans wasn't without an interest in the paranormal himself. He wrote to *Occult Review* in 1914 asking, "Can any of your readers explain the following, which, I find, on comparing notes with other shooting men, occurs to them as well as myself?" He continues, "at times, only for a few minutes, when shooting in competitions there comes a period when one cannot miss. The sensation is as if some invisible power had control of one's shooting; it feels as if something had hold of the muzzle of my rifle and held it firmly against the bull's-eye." *(Occult Review*, Vol 20 Issue 3 Sept 1914.) Sanders also alleges that Winans believed that dinosaurs might still be living in the "African Congo."

32 With this degree of remove I imagine I'm one of hundreds – if not thousands – that might be able to claim her as an ancestor.

The Stone Ghost Girl of Eyeworth Pond

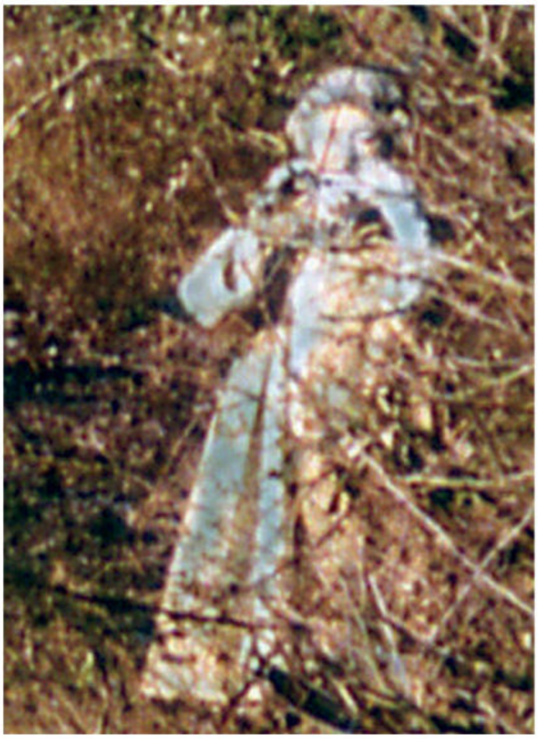
EMMA HEARD came across an unusual photograph from an unlikely source – and decided to employ the expertise of the Forteana Forums in helping determine whether she was dealing with a case of pareidolia, a mystery photographer or a genuine ghost photo...

It was completely by accident that I came across what is possibly the most mysterious ‘ghost’ photo I have ever seen. This strange image was to become quite the Forteana Forum sensation in the summer of 2024 – well, at least for a couple of months!

I was actually in the midst of researching an old sighting of a phantom coach and horses, apparently witnessed tumbling off a bridge in the village of Fritham in the New Forest. As it turns out, the coach-and-horses story turned up nothing more substantial than memories of an old newspaper cutting (as is often the case with such things), but my research did take a rather strange new turn. It was my partner who had originally told me about the phantom coach, and he was doing a bit of casual Googling while looking for some extra information for me. After disappearing down a few rabbit holes, he ended up on the website of the New Forest Hounds and came across an old story about a photo taken by a hunt supporter back in 1987. With great excitement, he sent it to me.

A website devoted to hunting is probably the last place on the Internet where I would expect to find a ghost photo. However, this image was sufficiently weird that even the usually pragmatic hunting set could not ignore it or account for it.

The image in question is that of a small, stone-like female figure, half hidden in the bushes next to Eyeworth Pond. The photo was posted by Pat Hudson, one of the hunt followers, who wrote this account to accompany it:



NEW FOREST HOUNDS

LEFT: An enlargement from the second of the 1987 photos showing the ‘stone ghost girl’.

The image in question is that of a small, stone-like female figure, half hidden in the bushes

“The photograph was taken at the end of a Saturday meet in January 1987. The meet was at the gatehouse cottage by the entrance to Eyeworth Lodge. It was a frosty morning so the meet had been put back to midday. A friend was riding with me and as the hounds left the meet, his wife ran over the bridge to take a photograph of the hounds coming towards her. They went back to London where a few days later she had the film developed at a branch of Boots. The two photographs are shown, just to indicate that the figure appeared within a few seconds, between the two photographs being taken. Who or what she is, is open to discussion. All we are certain of is that there was no one there on the day that looked or was dressed remotely like her. The film has been looked at by an expert and it is definitely not a case of double exposure. Some people say she is holding a camera but, even if she is, how was it that no one saw a very grey person dressed in these clothes on the day?

I thought the photograph was interesting enough to take it to the local paper and they printed a story with the pictures, which led to an approach from an independent photographer who asked if he could buy the negatives from us. I suggested that we let him exploit the photographs, as he had the expertise, and we go 50/50 on anything he made out of the story. He agreed to this and over the course of the next year a double page spread appeared in the *Sunday Mirror*, the *National Examiner* in the States ran a big story on it and a glossy Japanese magazine also picked it up – and that is but a few. I was sure we were going to enhance hunt funds by thousands of pounds and be able to do some much-needed repairs to our property – if not a total rebuild! Alas, when I tried to get some of our 50%, the man had turned to straw – or maybe to a ghost!!”

THE IMAGE IN QUESTION

In the first photo, you can see the hunt approaching a wooden bridge at a trotting pace. Nothing is particularly out of place in this image. It would have been only a matter of seconds before the second photo was taken. Horses moving at a 'hunting trot' cover the ground quickly. Have a look at what appears in the second photo.

My first thought was that it looked like some sort of stone statue, albeit a creepy one. It's a reasonably solid figure in a long, smock-type dress with what looks to me like an old-fashioned mob cap. But how did it get there? I couldn't see how the person taking the photo (or even a helper) would have had time to duck out, put a statue in the bushes and get out of the way before the second photo was taken (it's the same horse trotting towards the camera, by the way!); they would have had to be pretty speedy to get it done between photos and then get out of the frame.

Now, I will admit I do sometimes tend to jump to ghostly conclusions, and when I saw this photo, that's exactly what I did: it looked like a ghost to me, and I sprang into action to see if I could find any other accounts of strange phenomena in the area, as well as paying the location a visit. I know the area pretty well. Back in the early 2000s, I shared a horse in Fritham, and I regularly rode across this bridge. I decided to head back there in early September and have a dig about, OS map in hand.

Bearing in mind the original story I was looking into was that of the coach and horses that fell off the bridge, I did wonder whether this was the bridge in question, given that there are no others in the vicinity. Could the two stories be connected somehow?

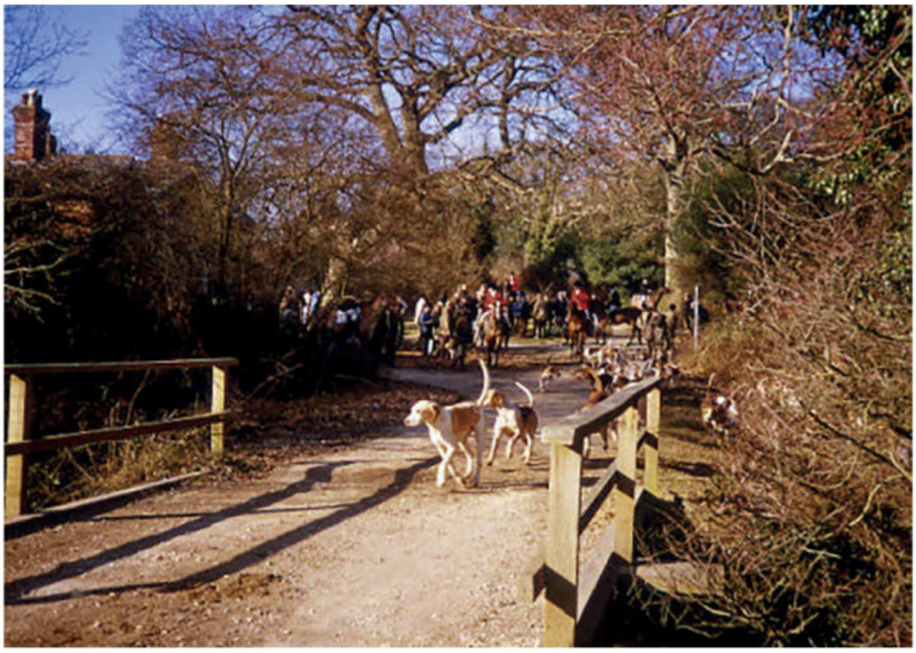
I ploughed through old newspapers from the area and could find no trace of any carriage accidents, although my search was hardly exhaustive.

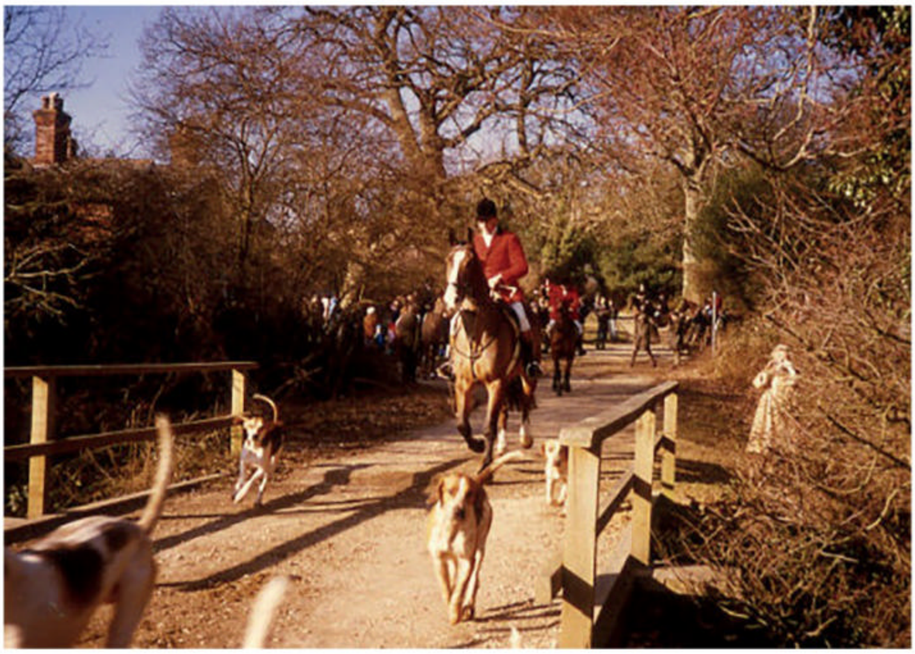
EYEWORTH POND AND THE SCHULTZE GUNPOWDER FACTORY

I did discover more about the history surrounding Eyeworth Pond. It was artificially constructed in 1871 by damming the original Latchmore Brook to supply the Schultze Gunpowder Factory. This was where powder for sporting guns was made, and it was based at Eyeworth Lodge, the building from which the hunt departed on the day of the photo. It was a huge factory, considering how rural the area was back then. At the height of its success, the factory supplied one-third of the sporting gunpowder in the world.

As you can imagine, there were several industrial accidents on the site. According to the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers of 1878, there were reports of explosions where men had been killed and injured. Another explosion that occurred led to workers' cottages being flattened, with bricks found half a mile away; no mention of local ghost stories though.

The road that runs past the factory is called Powder Mill Road. It was originally a track that connected the Downton and


NEW FOREST HOUNDS


NEW FOREST HOUNDS

TOP: The first photo, with nothing unusual to see. **ABOVE CENTRE:** The second photo. Have a look at the right-hand side. Who, or what, is that? **ABOVE:** Eyeworth Lodge, from where the New Forest Hounds set off on the day in 1987 when the photographs were taken.

EMMA HEARD

ABOVE LEFT: The Schultze Gunpowder Factory at Eyeworth Lodge during its heyday; it was operational from 1871 to 1921. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Some of the factory's surviving wooden buildings (visible in the centre of the previous photo) are now home to free-range pigs. **BELOW:** Eyeworth Pond, associated in local lore with a white lady.

Cadnam roads and is now a cycle track/bridleway. There were probably quite a few accidents in and around the site, in addition to the one killing the factory workers. The road would have been well-travelled by horses and carts associated with the factory. But would any accidents involving horses on the road (or young girls for that matter) have been recorded? It seemed unlikely.

The factory closed in 1921, and while some of the original wooden buildings remain, you can't get in and nose around as they are on private land. It's perhaps worth noting that there has been a hunting lodge on the site for many, many centuries.

So, by the time I finished my research, I was none the wiser. My guess at the time was that the stone ghost girl was somehow connected to the gunpowder factory, if she was indeed a ghost. Maybe there was an accident on that little wooden bridge at some point and this girl was one of the casualties. But no matter the back story, this photo was still rather fascinating, and I published the whole story on my blog.

A month later a woman got in touch with me. She had come across the blog and had an interesting story to share. She was aware of the local legend of a white lady who 'haunted' the pond. She also told me about the strange experience of a friend of hers who was a photographer. He was down by the pond one moonlit night in February 2014 when he saw a white lady in a long dress cross the path towards the pond. He was not aware of any local ghost stories at the time, but when the woman showed him the hunt photo, he was very shocked and admitted that the figure he had seen was very similar to the strange image in the photograph.

Following this, I received another short message from a local writer, Brice Stratford, who confirmed there is a very obscure local story about a ghostly girl dressed in white. Apparently, the girl was waiting for her fiancé to come back from the hunt one day, but he fell while out riding and broke his neck. She went mad and waited and waited (for days/weeks/years, depending on the version of the story) before drowning herself in the pond.

He was down by the pond one night when he saw a white lady in a long dress cross the path

Could this be our stone ghost girl, looking for her lost fiancé? And is this why she appeared when the hunt trotted over the bridge?

For me, this was the end of the story. It was an intriguing photo and I'd enjoyed doing some research and digging into its possible background – but what else could I find out?

OVER TO THE FORUM

Fast-forward to the summer of 2024, when the image appeared on the Forteana Forums. It was published without the backstory, and readers were simply asked, "What do you think?"

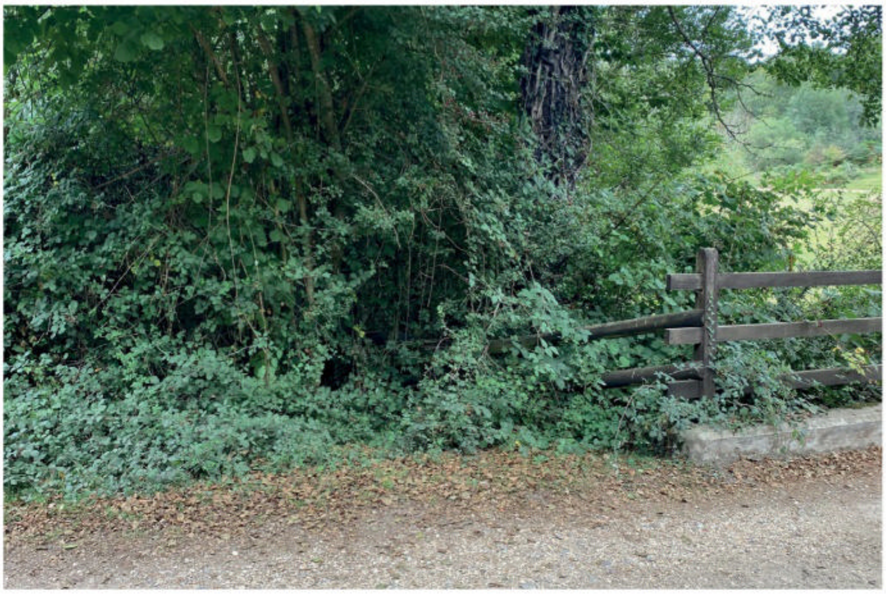
Forum members quickly jumped in. Could it be pareidolia? Is it a bag or a rag in a bush? Is it an actual stone figure placed in the bushes, the lighting lending it a rather ethereal quality?

The Forum members were excited. It was agreed from the get-go that if an everyday explanation was to be found, this would still be one of the best examples out there of an "It was almost a ghost" photo.

The discussions continued over the course of four months, with every last detail being examined, including the weather – could a gust of wind have blown something out of the bushes in time for the second photo? In my view, this is a no. If the previous night had been frosty, it's likely it wasn't a windy day, and in fact, one of the forum members looked into this. Also, I know horses very well, and if a random rag or plastic bag suddenly blew out from a bush, the horse definitely would have reacted; they are flight animals and they notice everything.

Perhaps it was a hunt supporter – or maybe even a hunt saboteur – taking photos of the hunt? A small woman who had popped up from the bushes to take photos? It certainly

EMMA HEARD


EMMA HEARD

LEFT: The spot where the stone ghost girl appeared in the 1987 photo as it looks today. **BELOW:** Exploring the site in 2021 when the author made a video for the Forteana Forums.

looks as if the figure is holding something up to her face – one of those old Instamatic-style cameras perhaps? Another member suggested she was pulling a scarf up over her face. It was a cold day, after all.

But how did she emerge from the bushes between the two photos? Again, surely the horse would have seen and reacted to this? In the first image, there are a couple of hounds in the bushes. They may have been investigating a person crouching there. It's hard to tell, but it's a possibility. Another factor that points to the figure not being a real person is the spot where she is standing. The ground there drops away, down towards the culvert which the bridge spans. It's a steep slope, one to two feet down, covered in brambles and undergrowth. It's not an easy place to get to and is quite precarious. And if she is holding a camera, why is it over her mouth and apparently pointing at the floor?

This could well be the explanation, though, and it is one favoured by many of the forum members, especially if you take into account the photo being tweaked before it was published. Of course, this was way before Photoshop existed, so major changes to an image were not easy to achieve, but changes to the light could certainly be carried out with a bit of know-how. It seems a blueish hue was added to the figure; to me, it looks as though slightly red eyes were added to it. It could turn a bog-standard fuzzy human into a ghostly-looking stone figure.

However, Pat Hudson, the original poster of the photo, claims there was no one there at the time. But, as was pointed out, if Pat was riding (with Mr Stolger, whose wife, Mrs Margaret Stolger, was the photographer), how could he be sure there was no one there? It's a well-known amateur photography fault: not perceiving anything other than what you are photographing. That being said, you would think, given that the photo has been widely shared, if a woman had been standing there in real life, someone else would have come forward and said, "I saw her".

Maybe they didn't want to spoil the mystery because, by Pat's own admission, once the image was discovered and touted to the newspapers, the hunt hoped to make some cash from it. The local newspaper employed a former air photographic officer to check the picture's validity; he was convinced the figure was actually there and not added later or caused by double exposure; so, assuming we believe that, we can rule out serious photographic tampering. However, there has definitely been some tweaking if you look at the hue in each of the images. The facial features in the close-up have far more definition than the original.

A clever GIF was created to investigate how and where the figure stood in each of the images, possibly discrediting the rag-in-the-bush idea, although some Forum members hold fast to that being the explanation.

Forum members compared the stone ghost girl photo to the Cumberland Spaceman photo (**FT196:29, 198:70, 286:28-29, 305:28**), in that it has led to fascinating discussions, and while some people truly believe they know the cause, other forum members remain unconvinced by any of the explanations.

Each individual point regarding this photo was debated thoroughly on the forums: to summarise, there are several possible explanations for the stone ghost girl:

Rags on a stick in the bushes

A woman, possibly taking a photo, standing on the slope, hence appearing 'small'

A stone statue pushed out for the photo, just in time for the second image to be taken

A very good example of pareidolia

A cardboard cut-out

An incredibly good hoax, created for high jinks and/or financial gain

Lastly, and most controversially, an actual ghost

Despite the lack of a definitive solution, the discussion showed the Forums at their best; as one member wrote: "I think this thread is one of the most interesting and exciting we've had recently. I love seeing everyone gather round – analysing, thinking, hunting and theorising!"

Personally, having now devoted hours of my life to this one photo, I am still on the fence when it comes to an explanation. It's probably a mundane 'real-life' phenomenon and not actually a ghost, but I think it's unlikely we will ever know for sure.

For that reason, I am going to file it in the 'unexplained' file – unless FT readers have any better ideas!

To read the original Forteana Forums discussion, go to: https://forums.forteana.org/index.php?threads/the-stone-girl-of-eyeworth.71324/

EMMA HEARD writes about the strange and unusual in Wiltshire and beyond at her blog www.weird-wiltshire.co.uk. She writes for *Haunted* magazine and is a regular guest on podcasts discussing paranormal tales from Wiltshire.

EMMA HEARD

MAKING THE CASE FOR SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION

PART 2

In the second part of his survey, LARRY E ARNOLD presents three more cases from his files suggestive of spontaneous human combustion; dating from 1964 to 2013, these baffling but deadly blazes share a number of puzzling characteristics that may point to more than just the 'human wick' effect at work...

Last time (**FT460:28-35**), we explored something of the historical background behind the idea of spontaneous human combustion and how the orthodoxy of forensics and fire experts has largely damned the phenomenon as impossible. And yet, firefighters and first responders often tell a quite different story. Here are three further 'impossible' cases that we have investigated over the years…

HOME-MAKER BEATRICE OCZKI

"It is the way of myths that they become self-sustaining. They develop lives of their own and once this happens, they are very difficult to kill… Spontaneous Human Combustion is a myth, a theory without facts." – Patrick M Kennedy, NFPA Technical Committees on Fire Investigations member in *The National Fire Investigator* (Dec 1986).

Mrs Beatrice Oczki was the victim of a chair fire in Bolingbrook, Illinois: so rules the Will County coroner's court. Not everyone in this affluent community 25 miles (40km) southwest of Chicago agrees. We made a 1,300-mile (2,100-km) round trip by motorcycle to speak with investigators and next-of-kin about this chair fire.[1]

At around 7pm on Friday 23 November 1979, Frank Oczki, recently divorced, departs for a Thanksgiving getaway, leaving his 49-year-old widowed mother, Beatrice, home alone.

COURTESY FRANK OCZKI

Around 12.20 the following afternoon, Frank's ex-wife opens the front door of the Oczki suburban split-level house. Standing in the foyer, she realises it is exceedingly dark and overly warm. She glances downstairs and notices a pile of charred material where her former mother-in-law often sat watching television. She calls police to report a chair fire.

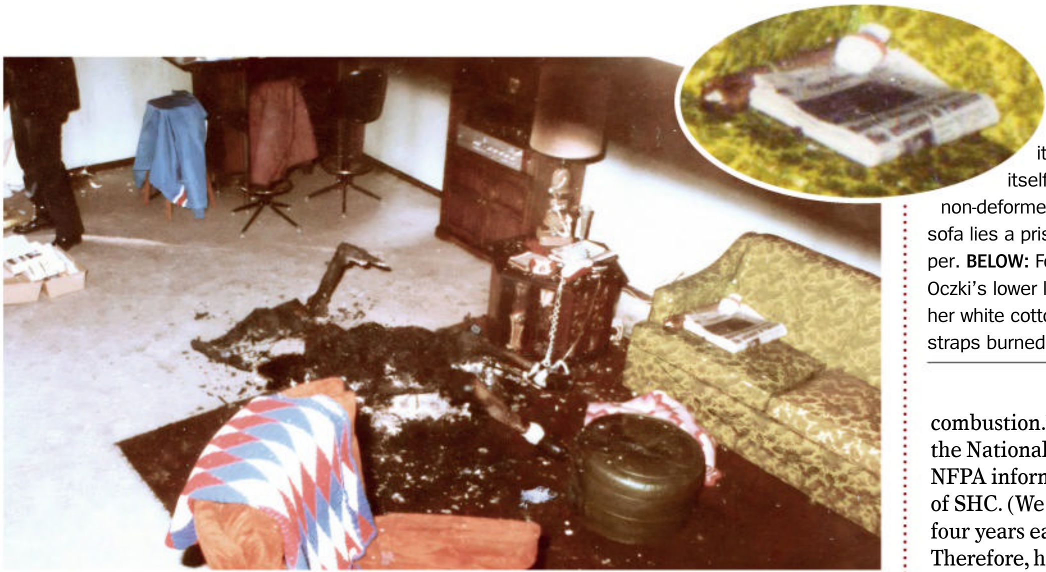
Bolingbrook Police log the call at 12.30pm and officers soon arrive at the Oczki home. Bolingbrook Fire responds at 12.40. At this point their normal procedures abruptly end, replaced with confusion, uncertainty and wonder. What appears to be a simple chair fire, isn't. "That's when it struck everyone – *there was a human form there!*" Bolingbrook fire marshal Vincent Calcagno will later tell us when we sit in his office.[2]

The scene defies the responders' training. Mrs Oczki's upholstered, high-back chair is badly burned. Its back appears to have been forced backward, snapping off before dropping to the floor. Shards of charred fabric hang from the chair's wood frame. The seat cushion is burned almost completely away, revealing still-coiled springs. Beneath the chair, ochre carpeting is blackened in a tight circle. The lower front corner of the chair lies on carpeting between her legs.

And Beatrice herself? The blaze – if it should it be called that – has burned deeply into her torso and devoured her left arm to the bone. From a charred wrist dangles her watch and its metal band. Her right shoulder, right arm, and right hand no longer exist. Her head, badly burned, appears intact.

"Total charring!" Calcagno explained. "You could tell it belonged to a human. But that was it…"

Fourth-degree burns on her lower legs stop abruptly at the top of her white cotton socks, providing a vivid contrast to seared skin and the black shoes she wore, themselves as pristine as the socks. She wore a brace on her left leg: its leather straps have burned off, leaving metal bands still attached to her shoe but without a full leg to support.



BOLINGBROOK FIRE DEPARTMENT

LEFT: The 'chair fire' in the lower level of the Oczki home produced minimal damage beyond its occupant. **INSET:** Like the fire itself, its heat was limited. Atop a non-deformed plastic slipcover on the Oczki sofa lies a pristine *Chicago Tribune* newspaper. **BELOW:** Fourth-degree burns on Beatrice Oczki's lower legs stop abruptly at the top of her white cotton socks; a leg brace's leather straps burned away, leaving metal supports.

Essentially, this resembles prolonged cremation.

Expected evidence for extreme fire damage elsewhere in the room is, like the woman's right side, virtually non-existent.

Investigators cannot ignore the vinyl-covered hassock a few inches from Beatrice's right foot. Its plastic is melted only where it faced her. The sofa's clear plastic slipcover, inches from her left foot, shows the merest hint of heat distortion. An unopened *Chicago Tribune* newspaper is pristinely folded on the sofa. On the floor under the toe of her left shoe is a pink crocheted afghan, as clean as if just laundered.

To her immediate left is a hexagonal cabinet. Heat melted one of its plastic decorative panels, now oozing surrealistically toward the floor like stretched tepid taffy. A table lamp and white Trimline phone are on the table. The phone gleams unsullied, its slightly heat-distended coiled cord dangling in front of the cabinet's melted panel. The lamp shows the merest of damage; its bulb, intact. (Incandescent light bulbs will distort toward the heat source after 10 minutes at 900°F/480°C.)

Upstairs, two pet dogs are found dead, assumed killed by combustion gases or a lack of oxygen. Also there, Stephen King's novel *The Shining*, about a haunted hotel consumed by fire.

Haunting, too, is the permeating fragrance in this real-life horror. Sitting across from Frank in his living room, we listen as he recalls that upon his return the house smelled, "Kinda like hickory, but sweeter! Like *incense*, almost."

Adding to the scene's oddity: beyond Beatrice herself, no indication of searing temperatures other than splayed paint in a small area of the ceiling directly above her chair.

Bolingbrook police overhaul the scene, release the house back to the family, and write the death off to "Smoking Materials."

Calcagno, returning to Bolingbrook after his own weekend away, expressed strong disagreement. *"That is not correct!* I *can't* buy that! There's too much damage," he quoted himself as we sat in his office.

WHEN BILL FERGUSON ARRIVED HIS REACTION WAS: "GOD, THIS LOOKS LIKE SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION!"

Bolingbrook's fire chief, Terrence Droogan, also wasn't buying into 'Smoking Materials' for this fire, telling us, "It baffles the hell out of me."

Because enough anatomy did remain, Calcagno insisted on a toxicology examination. It found no hydrocarbons, proving that no accelerant fuelled this blaze. Also not found: blood. "Every drop of blood was consumed," attested a mystified Calcagno.

What Beatrice Oczki had herself begun, a crematorium then completed.

When we met with the fire marshal's team in his office at the ultra-modern Bolingbrook public safety headquarters nine months after Mrs Oczki's passing, Calcagno confessed: "We *still* have our doubts about what happened."

When Will County lieutenant coroner Bill Ferguson had first arrived at the Ozcki home, he said his reaction was, "God, this looks like spontaneous human combustion." Ferguson then consulted the National Fire Protection Association. NFPA informed him that they never heard of SHC. (We had corresponded with NFPA four years earlier about SHC. Go figure.) Therefore, he announced that Mrs Oczki had dropped a cigarette on herself, igniting a smouldering blaze that slowly burned the cotton batting of the chair plus the body that sat upon it. That is, the human-wick effect.

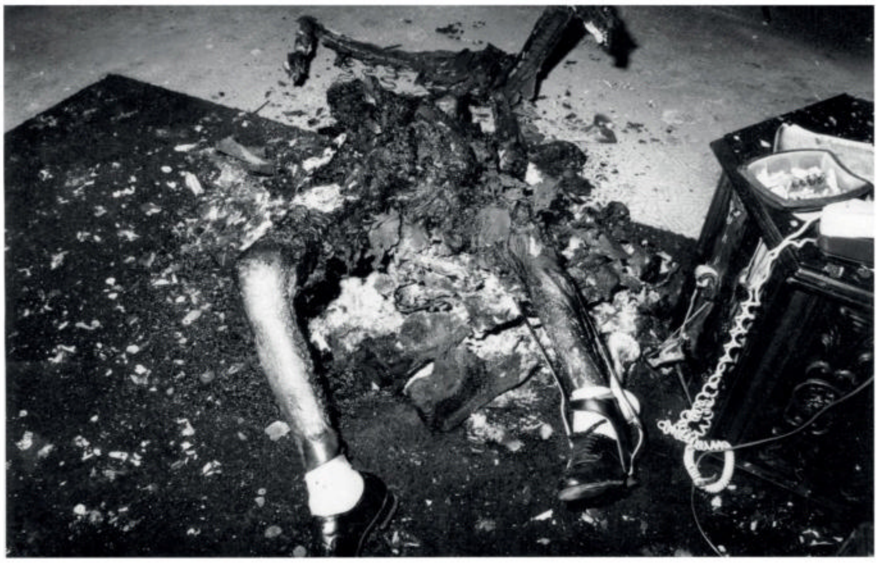
What did Calcagno think about this determination?

"Call me a realist!" he said sardonically, his voice bristling at the insinuation he was not competent to recognise a normal chair fire. "I've seen photographs of people that have died in overstuffed chairs from smoking materials, and the damage is *nowhere* near what that is!" he said, pointing to a photograph of Oczki in the remnants of her destroyed chair.

Nor arson-murder. "It was not a homicide. It's impossible! I mean if somebody took a blow torch, they couldn't do it," Droogan insisted heatedly.

"Well, that's it!" interjected Calcagno, explaining how his men had searched for flame-abetting materials. "We chipped the concrete and tile off the ground, we went *into* the concrete, and nothing was found. *How'd it happen?*"

We asked: Was there enough fuel load to sustain combustion long enough and hot enough to cause this much damage to a human? No, said Calcagno: "There's *no way* that that chair could have developed such temperatures to do that amount of damage.



BOLINGBROOK FIRE DEPARTMENT

There wasn't enough fuel loading to even initiate such a sequence of events."

Calcagno and Droogan had no patience for the dropped-cigarette-smouldering-chair solution for Beatrice's demise. Calcagno clearly found this fire unconventional. As did Droogan, who pointed to a photo on the wall of a huge industrial plant blaze that he had helped extinguish. There, he said, despite a jumble of flammable chemicals the temperature "wasn't much above 1,700 degrees!"

What *had* been the temperature in the Oczki household? "It was 98 degrees when I walked into the building," Droogan answered.

This led to another crucial consideration: *the time factor.* Beatrice's wristwatch had stopped. When? "About 12.15," Calcagno answered after paging through the case file.

Up to this point, all Bolingbrook officials associated with this case had assumed the fire began just after midnight; smouldered (or raged) for many hours; then died out due to lack of oxygen with the room cooling down to 98°F/37°C when officials arrived.

"But not necessarily!" Calcagno suddenly realised. We knew what he was about to say.

"*Not* 12 hours! *It could have happened 20 minutes before!*" he exclaimed emphatically.

A possibility – probability – if this was a case of SHC and not the human-wick effect in play.

We pointed out the police took the ex-daughter-in-law's call at 12.30pm. If Beatrice's wristwatch mechanism locked up at the start of the incident circa 12.15 – something Calcagno now acknowledged as plausible – then the ex-daughter-in-law may have missed by mere minutes seeing the ex-mother-in-law's Fire Within.

Decades of researching pyrophenomena had prepared us to expect a body incinerating itself in so short a time. On the other hand, the firefighters' training had not. A hush settled over those in the fire marshal's office to rival the reaction of officials who first entered the Oczki home on 24 November.

HE HAD COME UP THROUGH THE FIRE DEPARTMENT AS A PARAMEDIC, A FIREMAN, AN INSPECTOR AND NOW THE FIRE MARSHALL

Finally, Calcagno broke the silence. He spoke quietly, enunciating each word for impact: "It's. Just. That. Simple. *I can't figure it out.*"

None of his colleagues, who had gathered around, disagreed with their fire marshal.

Besides the potential brevity of this blaze, another atypical factor involved the smoke detector in the Oczki foyer. It failed to go off. Frank gave it to us. With its original battery installed we tested it – it functioned perfectly. No fire-fighting officer has been able to explain to us why a serviceable smoke detector failed in a fire that incinerated a person and killed two dogs; nor why this human-consuming combustion generated a fragrant, hickory incense aroma.

Calcagno had come up through the ranks as a paramedic, a fireman, an inspector, and now the fire marshal of an affluent community that could afford the best. He took pride in solving fires after putting them out. "It's been a long haul, a lot of fires," the knowledgeable fire marshal said of his career. *"But nothing like this!"*

LARRY E ARNOLD

LARRY E ARNOLD

TOP: Bolingbrook's Fire Marshal Calcagno and Fire Chief Droogan review the Oczki case file for the author. **ABOVE:** Inside this Upper Darby house a confined and extraordinarily rapid 'fire' consumed a grandmother.

Here, he faced a frightful fire that didn't require extinguishing but couldn't be solved. "I just don't know," he lamented. "We were *never* involved in a situation like that before. The puzzle was *so bizarre… so confusing.*"

All factors considered, SHC seems a proper closure for Beatrice Oczki. Calcagno concurred.

Over a handshake, he spoke about the challenges presented by this specific case and by SHC generally. "This could be happening today someplace," he said with a sincerity that would warm an Inuit in an arctic blizzard, "and somebody's just going to bury it. It'll be lost in a file, and you'll never know about it. Nor will anybody else remember it – unless you get to one of those progressive people who will at least give you the courtesy of a phone call."

Fire marshal Vincent Calcagno and fire chief Terrence Droogan disagreed with Patrick Kennedy's confident statement that "Spontaneous Human Combustion is a myth, a theory without facts."

GRANDMOTHER HELEN CONWAY

"Very often the victim is not seen for many hours prior to their discovery and the fire is discovered usually after self-extinguishment when someone comes looking for the victim or in response to smoke or smells." – John D DeHaan, Ph.D., "A Case of NOT-SO-SPONTANEOUS Human Combustion," *Fire & Arson Investigator* (June 1997).

Firefighters face consternation when they respond within minutes on Sunday morning, 8 November 1964, to a house fire at the Conway residence in Upper Darby Township, Pennsylvania.

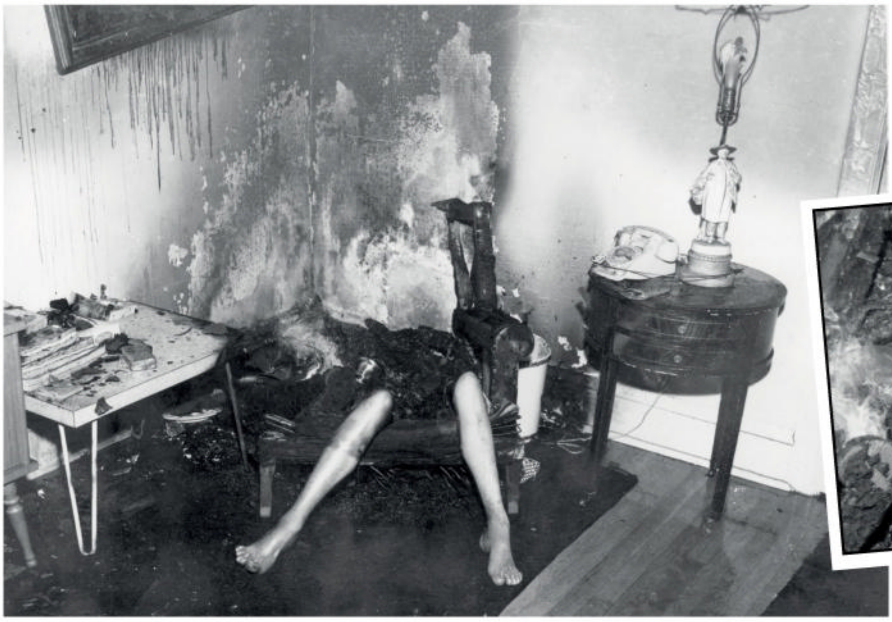
Esteemed fire instructor Howard Triebold alerted us to this event when we were granted special permission as a non-firefighter to attend his Advanced Arson Investigation course at the Pennsylvania Fire Academy in September 1975.

"Persistence is the name of the game" when investigating a fire, Triebold taught his students; "Know that you have investigated to the *fullest* of your capabilities… Don't be afraid to admit you can't explain a fire's cause. *Always* look for the unusual. And be *persistent!*"

Triebold ended the class with a touch of the unusual by passing around photographs he had just received that showed a woman burned up in a chair; a victim, he hinted, "of what some people call spontaneous human combustion." Reeser, we immediately think. We regale a classmate about her story… until the photos reach our hands.

Surprise! It's *not* Mary. This was a fire scene different from any we knew about.

After the others left, we introduce ourself to Triebold. Details about this fire? He had no name; no date; nothing to offer other



LARRY E ARNOLD

LEFT: Firefighters faced bewilderment once smoke was cleared from Mrs Conway's sitting room. **BELOW:** The victim's brass bell rests atop her heat-lacerated thigh; a charm bracelet dangles from her left ulna; smoke wisps around her upturned jaw and from the chair arm.

than it happened "somewhere in southeast Pennsylvania." Crap, we thought, that's 5,000,000 people living in and around Philadelphia; a proverbial needle in a humongous haystack.

Eight months later, we had a name for that needle. Unlike any SHC denier known to us, we undertake three 200-mile (320-km) round trips to interview another set of first-responders who could tell us the facts about yet another curious combustion.[3]

Robert C Meslin was a volunteer fireman and also his fire department's photographer in 1964, later rising through the ranks to become fire marshal for Upper Darby Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. He is key to understanding this fiery fatality.

To establish the facts, we correspond with him and then sit at his kitchen table to document what he witnessed.

"Upon arrival," recounted Meslin, "we found a considerable amount of smoke on the second floor which necessitated crawling on hands and knees." An assistant fire chief crept into the smoke-darkened sitting room, arms outstretched, groping to find the grandmother said to be there. His hand sank into something greasy that crumbled like burned charcoal. With the smoke cleared, he was unnerved to realise his hand had plunged into the deceased's gut. A long time would pass before the assistant fire chief was willing to enter another fire scene.

And what of this 51-year-old grandmother, businesswoman and fire victim, Mrs Helen Ann Conway?

Stunned firefighters stared in bewilderment, aghast at the astonishing scene they now faced. None had ever seen anything like this before. Disturbing their solemnity are wisps of smoke rising from the chair's right arm and the person seated therein.

Recovering from his shock, fire chief Paul Hagarty yells at Meslin to get his camera.

Meslin runs home, grabs his camera, and rushes back. By now, his colleagues have rid the scene of smoke. Meslin snaps a dozen black-and-whites. His photographs show the chair cradling Helen is deeply burned. Her two lower legs are reasonably intact, though the epidermis has bubbled in places. Subcutaneous tissue of both upper legs is split asunder, producing deep heat-fracture lacerations. The right leg above the knee is torn apart and wide open; the upper thigh appears disintegrated. Her upper right arm is barely discernible; its forearm, if it exists, is obscured by debris. Her left arm, such as it is, is flexed back onto itself; a metal charm-type bracelet dangles from the ulna – fully exposed – and rests upon some charred upper-arm muscle tissue.

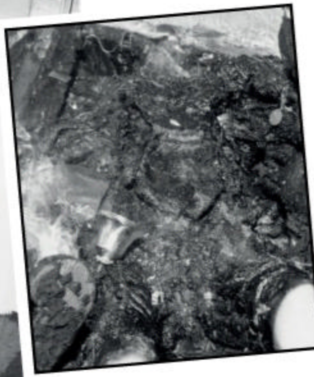
This flexing is not the pugilistic syndrome; that is, muscle contraction caused by a high-temperature fire. "There was no pugilistic effect here – which I thought strange," said Meslin. Just another quandary competing for attention in a larger mystery.

Two large pieces of the chest and sternum are charred and curl away from her torso. Jutting above the sternum is her lower jaw bone, noticeable as an inverted-V and partially obscured by whitish smoke still rising from Mrs Conway.

"There was enough for the coroner to remove in a rubber bag," Meslin observed, "but that was it."

A widow of 13 years, Helen was somewhat infirm and used a hand bell to summon assistance. Upon her lacerated right thigh rests her brass bell, intact; its wooden handle, unscathed. (Melting temperature of brass, approximately 1650°F/900°C.; pyrolysis of pine can vary, but generally happens around 788°F/420°C).

Carpet directly beneath the chair, charred. Wooden baseboard behind the chair, singed. Varnish on the table that sat inches from the death chair, lightly blistered. A white trash can between the table and the chair, unaffected, its gleaming surface visible through the burned-out chair arm. Back of the chair, collapsed or disintegrated. This allows her torso to fall – or be pushed – backwards into the beckoning void.



Meslin summed up the view of everyone present at this fire-fatality when he confided to us: "This case is *far worse* than any other we've experienced!"

So much worse that legal identification of the victim proves difficult. Insurance investigators sift through the remains, looking for a $3,000 ring she wore. Had it been stolen by a murder-arsonist in the family? Eventually found intact in the debris, the ring legally identifies Helen as the person deceased.

The ring poses its own mystery. Recalled assistant fire marshal Harry Lott, awestruck: "It was in good shape! Now here's a piece of jewellery – which was, I'm sure, 14K gold – which was exposed to that *intense* heat, and yet there wasn't a mark on it! Now that to me, is almost unbelievable! Because gold melts at a fairly low temperature [1500°F/815°C for 14K gold]."[4]

Any odour? "I didn't smell any hydrocarbons," fire marshal Meslin remembered. "In fact, I don't really recall the odour of burning flesh. I can hear the assistant chief, who was first in the room, never mention any smell."

Meslin's photographs confirm the anatomical impact and apparent formidable heat in this strikingly localised fire. Can they reveal even more, like the crucial time factor? Yes.

"The amazing part of the incident in my opinion is the *time element*," Meslin marvelled, knowing that his last photograph includes a clock that locks down the time. Amazing it is.

"The victim is reported to have been a heavy smoker with careless smoking habits. Cigarette burn marks were evident about her bedroom. However," the fire marshal quickly pointed out, "the extent of burning to the victim and the complete combustion of the upholstered chair in which she was seated in a span of *21 minutes* (including time for photographs) leaves a lot to think about."

This widow's annihilation by fire occurred in 21 minutes, avows the fire marshal.

Hours-long smouldering of flesh caused by a dropped cigarette, anyone? When a lit cigarette *is* the ignition source, smouldering can begin within several minutes but, sans accelerants or flammable materials, takes two-to-three *hours* before smouldering bursts into open flame.

"That's typical," says Andrew McGuire, executive director of The Burn Center. However, the combustion that ravaged Helen's chair and its occupant never approached open-

LARRY E ARNOLD

LARRY E ARNOLD

ABOVE LEFT: "I've never seen a case like this since, and I never saw one before like it," assistant fire marshal Harry Lott said about the Conway fire he attended. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A hyper-localized fire fatality happened in 2013 inside this house outside Muldrow, Oklahoma.

flame flashover in her room.

Did this 'smouldering' incineration of a human being require only an astoundingly brief 21 minutes, as Meslin stated? No. It happened quicker.

How quick? The answer lies in commonsense deduction plus the testimonies of Upper Darby's fire chief Paul Hagarty, assistant fire marshal Harry Lott and fire marshal Meslin himself.

"The parameter we put around the time was anywhere from six to 20 minutes, as near as we could discern it," Lott informed us during a lengthy interview at his home. "There was talk about saying half an hour. And it just wasn't a half an hour!"

Six minutes?

Lott's estimate for the low end of the time available for this fire to unfold – a fire he remembered with crystal clarity – coincided with a determination we had already reached with Meslin at his kitchen table.

The fire alarm was logged at 8.45am, Meslin remembered, within "three minutes" after granddaughter Steffany said she had spoken to Helen. That meant grandma was alive at 8.42. Firemen arrived within three minutes of getting the call. Conclusion: the blaze which swept through Helen had wreaked its havoc by 8.48. That is, within six minutes. This matched the low end of Lott's timeframe. After we worked out the timeline with Meslin for him to fetch his camera and return and take 12 photographs, the fire marshal also agreed to six minutes, max.

Imagine: *360 seconds* is all the time this localised inferno needed to combust a human being and chair, then die out. (Of course, it could be *less* time.)

Could a dropped cigarette – hence the human-wick effect – be the cause?

"I don't believe there is any way in this world that that chair could have generated – from a cigarette – enough heat to decompose her body to the point that it was destroyed *in that time frame!"* Lott stressed.

Could criminal action be involved? Foul play was absolutely ruled out, Meslin said emphatically. "We did all of the investigations that were necessary to determine foul play," echoed Lott, "and there was no evidence of *any* foul play! She apparently came from a very loving family."

Can cremation science offer any insight? Not until 1990 did Industrial Equipment and Engineering Company, a leading US manufacturer of crematoria, market a retort at $100,000 capable of cremating an adult human in one hour – 10 times longer than it took Mrs Conway to burn.

"I'M A VOLUNTEER FIREMAN. DON'T KNOW HOW THIS CAN HAPPEN. YOU NEED TO BE OPEN-MINDED, NOT BE MYOPIC"

To quote Lott: "This lady died from extreme heat. Her body was decomposed by extreme heat in a relatively short period of time... They were extremely high temperatures to do that damage. Where they came from, I don't know. I mean, I have a lot of background in the fire service, and I just don't know how it can be."

Under the circumstances – including (again) the absence of burned flesh odour – no conventional house fire combustion recognised in 1964 can explain the burning that enveloped this grandmother and her chair. As Meslin said: "Things *just don't burn* this way!"

But they do. Helen Conway did. For those who choose to examine Meslin's photographs and accept the testimony of knowledgeable fire officials at the scene, this case speaks to sudden – *very* sudden – human cremation. To quote fire chief Hagarty's summation of this short-duration fire that baffled his crew: "I think Helen Conway died of spontaneous human combustion."

DANNY VANZANDT

"There's something else out there. We need to be open-minded. I'm a volunteer fireman who's done criminal and civil investigating. I don't know how this can happen... You have to know the game you're playing. You need to be open-minded, not be myopic." – James Roman, Upper Darby fireman, on localised human incinerations (personal exchange).

Mid-morning of 18 February 2013: dark smoke issues through an eave of Danny Vanzandt's home outside Muldrow in east-central Oklahoma. Before crews from Muldrow Fire and Redland Volunteer Fire can arrive, a relative climbs through the kitchen window to locate the fire's source and make sure Danny, 65, is safe.

On the floor of the smoke-darkened kitchen lies what is thought to be the smoke's source: a trash bag on fire. It isn't that. When firefighters arrive and clear the air, they realise the smoke comes not from blazing trash but from Danny himself. Another extremely localised fatal fire.

Local media soon broadcasts Sequoyah County Sheriff Ron Lockhart saying of the case: "It's very unusual and bizarre… Spontaneous human combustion is not ruled out." About SHC, he tells KSFM-TV: "We're not ruling it out. I've worked a lot of fires and I've never seen anything like this."

We phone Sheriff Lockhart as soon as we hear about this incident. He says he knows about our research, welcomes our interest, and offers cooperation. Expectantly hopeful, we immediately begin planning a trip.

Although an Oklahoma blizzard delays our initial arrival, we will make two 2,400-mile (3,860-km) round trips to explore this event. And, for the first time, film in real-time an active investigation of an alleged SHC case for television: Science Channel's *The Unexplained Files* (S1,E4; 2 Oct 2013).

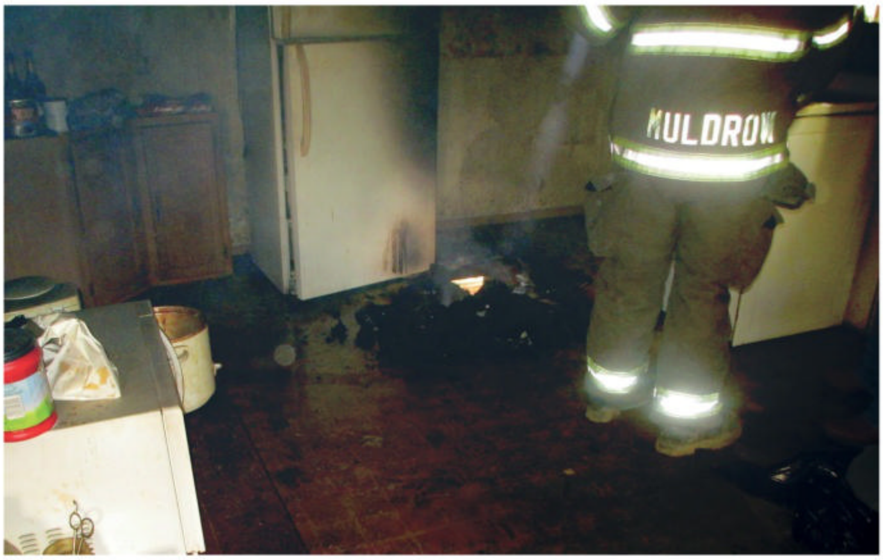
Not deterred by weather or facts, Internet trolls immediately pounce on Sheriff Lockhart, roasting him over online coals for being a rube; a dim-witted Okie lawman; naïve and plain-ass "stupid."

What the trolls didn't know: before being elected sheriff, Lockhart spent two decades as an arson investigator. He is smart, educated, and knows what to expect at any fatal fire. Until *this* one –

Adjacent to Danny's refrigerator a small hole is burned through the kitchen floor. Around its perimeter lay his head and shoulders; arms with fourth-degree burns; one foot, up-right; some coins from his coverall's pocket. Also one internal organ, the heart. In the crawl space below are bone fragments; ashes; no organs.

Kitchen ceiling, unsinged. Refrigerator door, ajar with traces of caramel-hued carbonisation that suggest Danny had been standing there to fetch something when the unforeseen intervened.

Looking for the fire's cause, Redland volunteer fire chief Rick Russell meticulously examines all appliances for malfunctions, especially the nearby gas stove. He rules



SEQUOYAH COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

LEFT: Odourless smoky haze hides another localized blaze when firefighters first enter. **BELOW LEFT:** Minimal damage to surroundings and none to ceiling by 'fire' that Redland fire chief Rick Russell said "began, and ended, at the body." **BELOW:** The *Sequoyah County Times* (9 Sept 2013) headline defuses "whisperings of spontaneous combustion" and dismisses the mystery of Vanzandt's death.

Cause of death not spontaneous combustion

Medical examiners office releases report

them out. Odour of combustion? Nowhere, he says.

Sound familiar?

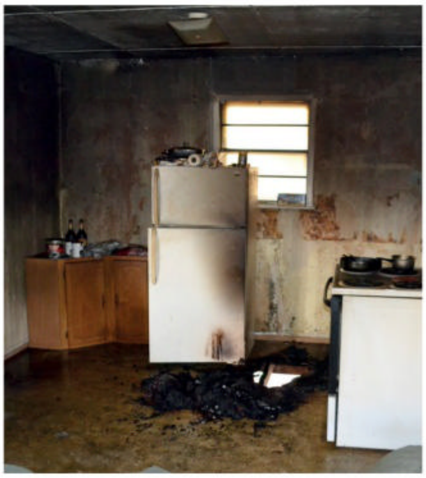
As chief Russell succinctly tells us: "This fire began, and ended, at the body."

We desperately wanted to meet next-of-kin to learn about Danny's life, as well as his passing. When had someone last spoken to him? Was there a precursor symptom overlooked as insignificant? Was he getting androgen deprivation therapy for prostate cancer, with sudden (extreme?) heat flashes being a known side effect? Could something in his behavioural history provide insight? A loved one's passing never makes this easy; even more delicate when the circumstances are sensationally odd.

Danny's father finally, graciously, agrees to an interview. While we are en route, he telephones to cancel. Media hints about something as strange as SHC had distressed the family, understandably. Not long afterwards, they have the dwelling destroyed in a control-burn training exercise for Redland Volunteer Fire. It's one way to make something disquieting disappear.

However, Danny's trachea and heart did remain, affording opportunity for post-mortem analysis. Dr Joshua Lanter, deputy chief medical examiner for Oklahoma's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner Eastern District, would do the autopsy. While in Oklahoma, we made several requests to meet him, including a stop at his office en route back to the Tulsa airport. He declined them all, but agreed to send his report. Seven months later it arrived.

"The lack of soot within the airway and a negative carboxyhemoglobin level within the procured blood sample suggests death prior to the fire," Dr Lanter determined. "One plausible scenario involves the decedent collapsing and dying (likely due to the coronary artery disease noted at autopsy) on the kitchen floor at which time a lit cigarette ignites the decedent's clothing and burns long enough to split the skin and release adipose tissue onto the clothing and floor and this adipose tissue then becomes the primary fuel source for the fire," the deputy chief medical examiner posited.



SEQUOYAH COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

The human-wick scenario, again. Neat and tidy and convenient, definitely. But plausible?

Local media thought so. The *Sequoyah County Times* (9 Sept 2013) now front-paged how a fat-fuelled smouldering flame dashed "whisperings of spontaneous combustion". Laying to rest all mystery, it dutifully reported the medical examiner's conclusion that "probable cause" for Danny Vanzandt's passing was "coronary artery disease."

Probable, not definitive, cause. The medical examiner's report lacked details we had sought about injury to Danny's ankles and shoulder, where his burns stopped. Did tissue show heat gradation as flame/heat slowly inched inward, indicating a smouldering oxidation-type combustion? Or did damage to tissue stop abruptly, suggesting something quite different? And again, why no noxious burned-flesh odour? Regrettably, these questions must now await answers at another such fire fatality.

Dr Lander ruled officially that Danny Vanzandt died of "natural" causes. No objection. However, what is natural for a death like this? Perchance an undiscovered biochemical or bioelectrical or quantum process in Fort's Super Sargasso Sea – one that is so rapid and all-consuming that Danny had no time to inhale particulates as he dropped to the floor, the process continuing unimpeded, naturally, until it spontaneously stopped. Could this scenario be natural too, albeit rare and authoritatively refuted by those who, unlike Sheriff Lockhart, are disinclined to consider impossibilities?

When KOCO-TV News5 asks if SHC is how Danny died, we answer conservatively: "We cannot say that it is. We cannot say that it isn't. Nor can any investigator, because the only way that determination could be made at this point is if there was an eyewitness to the event. There is no eyewitness. It's an ongoing mystery."[5]

Dr Lander verified to us that, months later, the actual cause of this fire fatality remains unknown to him. To the local firefighters. To us. And so the mystery of another disconcerting combustion lingers on with the passing of Mr Vanzandt… one more irreconcilable incident that mirrors other cases exhibiting the hallmarks that history ascribes to classic SHC.

● ***NEXT ISSUE: WRAPPING IT UP – THE FACTS VS THE SCEPTICS***

NOTES

1 See Larry E Arnold, *Ablaze! The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion*, M Evans, New York, 1995, pp.319-328.

2 Vincent Calcagno and Terrence Droogan, pers. comms, 18 July, 20-21 August 1980.

3 *Ablaze!*, pp.378-392.

4 Harry Lott, Upper Darby Township (PA) Assistant Fire Marshal, pers. comms; 6 & 17 December 1994

5 www.5newsonline.com/article/news/local/outreach/back-to-school/parascience-expert-visits-where-local-man-burned/527-56f481ce-4513-4ff6-bf60-a709f42ea0e5

LARRY E ARNOLD has spent decades conducting archival research and first-responder interviews and collecting photographic evidence. This resulted in his book *Ablaze! The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion* (1995). Regarded by some as the world's leading advocate for SHC, he has also been described as a pseudo-scientist, "mystery monger" and "world-class fool". His forthcoming appearance in *The UnXplained with William Shatner* will hopefully depict honestly the mystery of SHC.

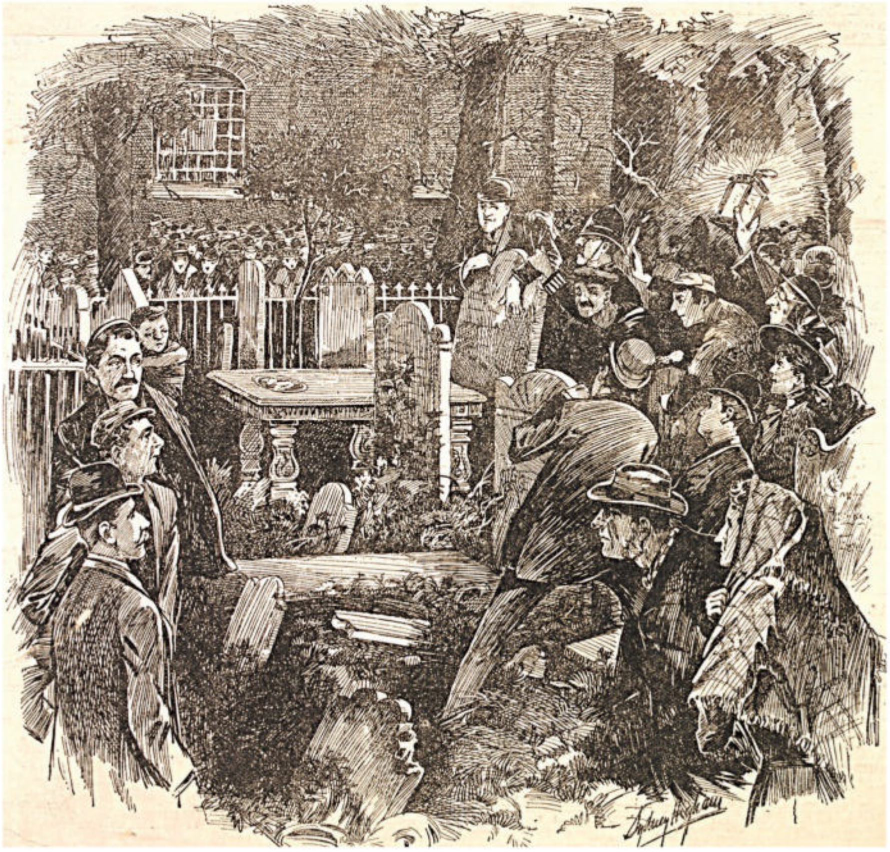
THERE'S A RIOT GOING ON!

Summer heatwaves and social pressures can occasionally lead to an August 'riot season'. Such mayhem usually has a political origin, but not always – sometimes public disorder can result from completely illogical causes once enough people become involved. IAN SIMMONS looks at some classic examples of the madness of crowds...

LONDON GHOST RIOTS

FT has covered these a number of times, with one of the earliest and most disastrous examples taking place in Hammersmith in 1804 (see **FT296:42-45, 310:30-35, 452:16-18**). Then a semi-rural village on the outskirts of London, Hammersmith was a maze of dark lanes interspersed with fields, trees and footpaths, but it still managed to have a rowdy nightlife centred on its pubs. It also had St Paul's church, with its graveyard. For several months from October 1803, pranksters, local rumour and lurid press reports led to packs of armed and over-excited young men roaming the area to try and "catch" a ghost allegedly seen flitting about the churchyard and lanes, while watchmen and parish constables ineffectually attempted to rein them in, this being before police forces were established. Unrest came to a head on 3 January 1804, when 29-year-old Francis Smith spotted bricklayer Thomas Millwood, 22, walking home in the traditional white clothes and apron of his trade, mistook him for the ghost, and shot him dead.

London's taste for ghost-inspired misrule resurfaced throughout the 19th century. In 1867, several young men ended up in court for creating a disturbance in Woburn Square after reports of a ghost seen in one of the houses attracted a large and excited crowd that turned violent when police tried to clear the area, while the next year an alleged ghost in Cromwell Terrace, Paddington, drew a similarly unruly crowd that resisted dispersal by police. In 1895 it was the church of St John in Hackney that was the centre of another ghost riot (**FT291:76**), with over 1,000 men and women turning out in a rowdy crowd hunting "a ghost in a sheet" that had been spotted in the churchyard late at night. Carrying lamps and candles and armed with sticks and stones, they swarmed the graveyard, trampling graves and overturning memorials, while mischief-makers periodically shouted "There it goes!" causing everyone to rush to another part of the cemetery. It took police until daylight to restore order and evict the rioters.



ABOVE: "The hunt for the Hackney Ghost: midnight scene in St. John's Churchyard", in a newspaper report from 26 August 1895.

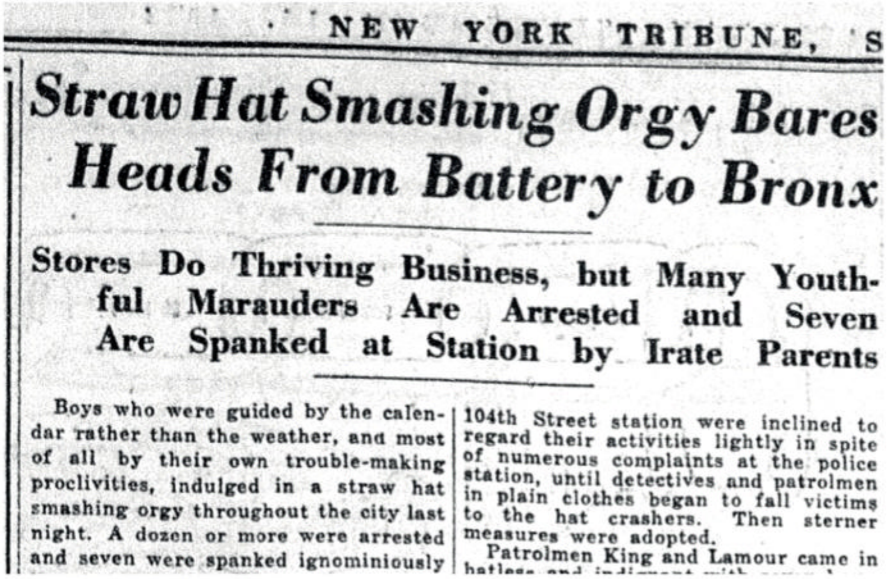
V&A IMAGES / VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

OVER 1,000 MEN AND WOMEN TURNED OUT IN A ROWDY CROWD HUNTING A GHOST

In 1900, 1,500 people thronged a house in Edith Villas in West Kensington after a ghost was reportedly seen at the windows. The excited horde attempted to attract the spook's attention by hurling stones at the house and ended up smashing all the windows before police arrived to break up the crowd and protect the premises. Such phantom rowdiness was not confined to London. In Miamisburg, Ohio, a graveyard ghost sighting in 1884 resulted in over 1,000 heavily armed locals turning out and actually opening fire en masse on what they took to be a floating apparition, with little effect. They then went on to ransack the tombs of the Vuss family, where they exhumed and destroyed three corpses. As the 20th century progressed, ghosts seemed to prompt less energetic responses, with one in Lambs Conduit Street in Holborn in 1921 only attracting a crowd of children, although as late as March 1970 the Highgate Vampire panic provoked a mass invasion of Highgate Cemetery that needed police intervention.

NYC STRAW HAT RIOT

In New York, in 1922, it was hats. In the early part of the 20th century light straw boaters were almost ubiquitous summer hats for



NEW YORK TRIBUNE, S

Straw Hat Smashing Orgy Bares Heads From Battery to Bronx

Stores Do Thriving Business, but Many Youthful Marauders Are Arrested and Seven Are Spanked at Station by Irate Parents

Boys who were guided by the calendar rather than the weather, and most of all by their own trouble-making proclivities, indulged in a straw hat smashing orgy throughout the city last night. A dozen or more were arrested and seven were spanked ignominiously

104th Street station were inclined to regard their activities lightly in spite of numerous complaints at the police station, until detectives and patrolmen in plain clothes began to fall victims to the hat crashers. Then sterner measures were adopted.

Patrolmen King and Lamour came in

LEFT: A report on the Straw Hat riots from the *New York Tribune, 16* Sept 1922. **BELOW**: King Street, Toronto, in 1856; the previous year it had been the scene of the city's infamous clown riot.

men, and in the US a tradition grew up that they should not be worn after 15 September, which became known as "Felt Hat Day". It also became traditional for anyone wearing a boater after this date to have it snatched from their head, after which the crown was sometimes "humorously" punched out. As early as 1910 *The Pittsburgh Press* newspaper was warning that although it was socially acceptable to wreck a friend or workmate's hat, "It was not right for a stranger to do so" as that went beyond the bounds of "fun".

On 13 September 1922, youths in the Mulberry Bend area of Manhattan in New York clearly decided it would be no fun to wait until the official Felt Hat Day two days later, and gangs of them took to snatching straw hats from local factory workers and stomping on them. Some though, made the mistake of trying this with dockers, who did not take kindly to it and fought back. The result was a massive brawl that brought traffic on Manhattan Bridge to a halt until it was broken up by police. Reporting on the riot, the *New York Times* defended the "undeniable right of a man to wear a straw hat in a snowstorm if he so desires" and warned that "jail terms or assault charges await rioters if such behaviour does not cease". All that happened was that rioters, many in their teens, switched their attentions to the East Side and Upper West Side, where they raced around the streets destroying hats, with some of the miscreants now armed with large nail-studded sticks for hooking boaters. At one point a mob of at least 1,000 teenagers brought chaos to Amsterdam Avenue, mobbing any straw hat wearer who dared show their face. This behaviour led to running fights in the street between gangs and hat-wearers, resulting in numerous injuries, some needing hospital treatment, and many arrests. In all, straw hat rioting continued for eight days before the gangs either got bored with it, police managed to suppress the disorder, or too few people were wearing boaters to make it worthwhile.

The tradition of destroying straw hats after 15 September continued for a few more years, and one hat wearer was killed during a fight over them in 1924, but the tradition petered out after President Coolidge ignored the deadline and as boaters slipped out of fashion.

TORONTO CLOWN RIOT

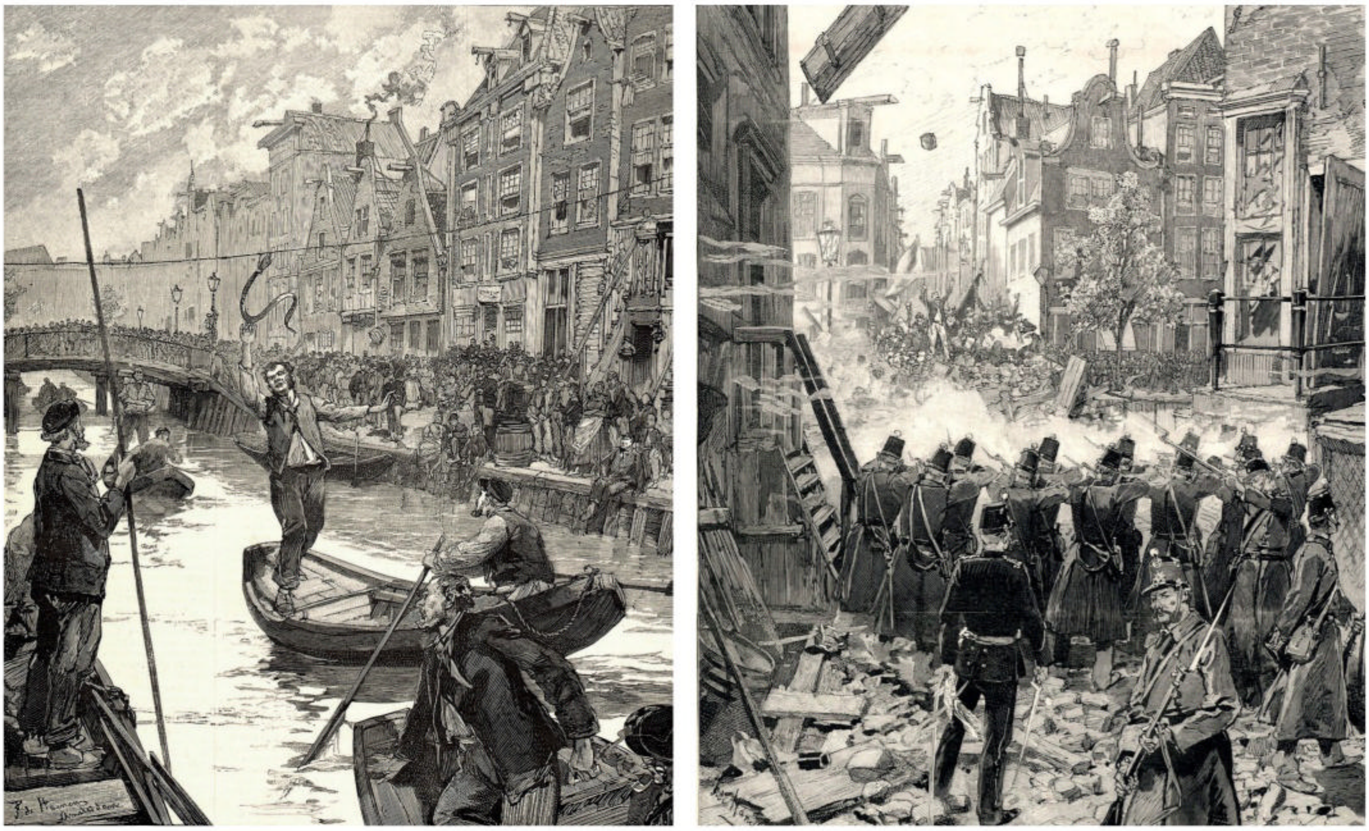
While performing in Toronto in early July 1855, clowns from the SB Howes' Star Troupe Menagerie & Circus decided to spend the evening of the 12th at the bordello on King Street belonging to Mary Ann Armstrong. This was a favourite off-duty haunt of volunteer firemen from the Toronto Hook and Ladder Firefighting Company and at some point there was a disagreement between one of the clowns and a firefighter. This led to a major brawl between the two factions that sprawled out into the street and ended up with the clowns soundly beating the firemen, who were forced to retreat. The following day an unruly crowd turned up at the circus pitch on Fair Green, demanding that one of the clowns, named Meyers, be handed over to them. When the circus refused, they shouted abuse, threw stones and set fire to the circus wagons, causing the fire alarm to be sounded. However, when the Hook and Ladder arrived, instead of fighting the fires, they joined the riot, wrecking circus property. Police also did nothing to stop the chaos; like the firefighters, they were members of the city's Protestant Orange Order, the dominant political force in Toronto at the time, so gave the firemen a free hand to take revenge. Order was not restored until the mayor of Toronto called out armed militia to suppress the riot, and it became a key factor in triggering a major reform of law enforcement in the city.

AMSTERDAM EEL PULLING RIOT

A popular Amsterdam entertainment used to be eel-pulling, or Palingoproer. This involved stretching a rope over one of the city's canals and hanging a live eel from it; competitors then sailed underneath and attempted to snatch the slippery eel off the rope without falling into the canal, often with significant financial prizes for the winners.

By 1886, though, Palingoproer had been banned by the government on the grounds that it was "cruel public entertainment". This did not deter residents living alongside the Lindengracht canal, who held an eel-pulling on 25 July 1886. Fishmongers tied a rope between the houses at numbers 184 and 119 and suspended a live eel from it, offering a prize of six guilders, almost a week's wages, to the successful puller. This soon attracted police attention, and two officers cut the rope suspending the eel, which hit a spectator on the way down. Incensed, the spectator laid into the officers with an umbrella, causing the crowd to turn on the police, beating them badly. Drawing their sabres, the policemen managed to fight their way out, returning with reinforcements at whom the rioters hurled cobblestones. Disorder continued until 10pm when rain temporarily brought the imbroglio to an end; but the next day unrest resumed, and locals laid siege to the police station, trapping the officers inside. Amsterdam authorities responded by calling in the

CLOTHING DRY GOODS
CARPETS
BROWN BROTHERS
PAPER HANGINGS
ANTHONY



ABOVE: Two illustrations from *L'Illustration*, 7 Aug 1886, show how a bit of good-natured eel pulling got out of hand, leading to the army being called in to Amsterdam and opening fire on the rioting locals, killing 26 people. **BELOW**: Oompa Loompas and others turn violent at a Melbourne darts tournament in 2015.

army. The locals fought back, building barricades and taking to the rooftops, from which they pelted the soldiers with tiles. The troops responded by opening fire on the rioters with live ammunition, killing 26 and bringing the disorder to a decisive end. Two thousand more rioters were given prison sentences, while the shaken police officers were consoled with free cigars. In 1913, a preserved eel that was claimed to be the one that started the scrap was sold at auction for 175 guilders.

BROWN DOG RIOTS

This sustained bout of unrest began with the public vivisection of a stray dog at University College London in 1903 by Dr William Bayliss and Professor Ernest Starling for an audience of medical students. The event had, however, been infiltrated by two undercover antivivisectionists who went on to publicly allege that the procedure was unnecessary, and that the animal was insufficiently anæsthetised. This provoked various legal actions by the medics and outrage from animal lovers, supported by the National Anti-Vivisection Society, which made the whole affair something of a *cause célèbre*. It culminated in a successful fundraising drive to erect a statue to the dog in Latchmere recreation ground, Battersea, south London. This only inflamed things further; the statue was repeatedly attacked by gangs of medical students, leading to fights with Battersea locals, who were defending it with the support of a variety of feminists, suffragettes, trade unionists, radical liberals and anarchists. This caused riots, rallies and disturbances in support of both sides to take place intermittently across London, leading to questions being asked in Parliament. The statue had to have police protection round the clock until Battersea Council covertly removed it overnight, after which the disturbances died down; it hasn't been seen since.

MELBOURNE DARTS RIOT

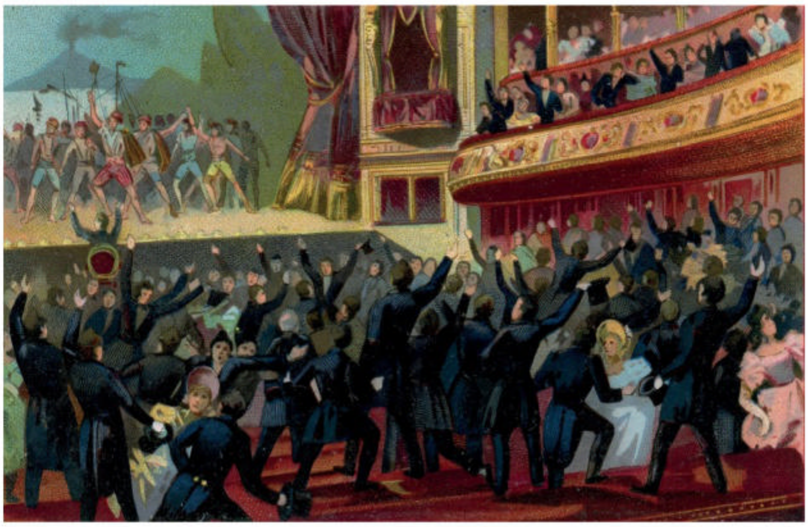
More recently, in January 2015, surreal mayhem broke out at a darts tournament at the Ethiad Stadium in Melbourne, Australia, during a final contested by Michael 'Mighty Mike' Van Gerwen and Simon 'The Wizard' Whitlock. Some of the large crowd, described as "drunken idiots that were bored and looking for a bit of excitement", started the unrest by urinating on the stadium floor and building a chair pyramid in the centre of the arena. "There were entire rows basically demolished, chairs being put on piles and tables started getting involved," witness Andrew Portbury said, adding, "People were diving on top of the tables and it just became this huge mess very, very quickly." Other audience members objected, and scuffles broke out that resulted in "people being body-slammed into furniture" while others hurled lawn chairs at each other. As is the custom at Australian darts matches, many audience members were in fancy dress, and as the violence increased, commentators at the event described "a man dressed as Batman's sidekick Robin wrestling with an English knight" as well as "men in Hawaiian shirts and a gang of Oompa Loompas throwing furniture".

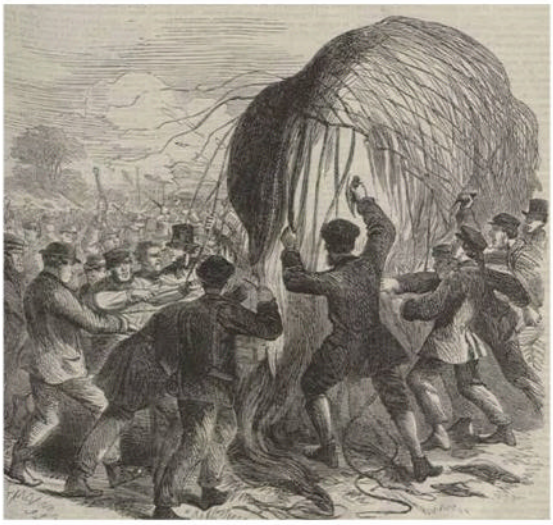
SCOTT BARBOUR / GETTY IMAGES

Unrest spread throughout the venue, and, with an apparent air of nostalgia, a *Daily Telegraph* reporter described it as "reminiscent of an England away game circa 1998". Play was suspended and the police were called, bringing the riot to an end by ejecting 40 people from the stadium. The *Washington Post* described it as a "goofy display of booze-filled rebellion" and while the violence had been widespread and extensive damage was caused to the arena, it mostly involved people throwing lightweight plastic chairs, so no one was seriously injured. Once play resumed, Van Gerwen won the match 9-8, having fought back from 5-1 and 8-4 down.

BRUSSELS OPERA RIOT

It isn't just popular sporting events that can trigger riots; an opera performance on 25 August 1830 resulted in a riot with consequences that are felt even today. The





ABOVE LEFT: It all kicks off during a performance of Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, on 25 August 1830. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The unfortunate aeronaut Henry Tracey Coxwell found himself beset by a mob of angry balloonatics in Leicester's Victoria Park in July 1884.

day was meant to be a celebration of 15 years of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a country created at the Congress of Vienna in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat and which encompassed most of the present day Netherlands and Belgium. It was an uncomfortable patchwork of former states that had once belonged to France or the Holy Roman Empire where the north was mainly inhabited by Dutch speaking Protestants and the south by French speaking Catholics. As a result, there was much dissatisfaction and separatist sentiment.

Unwisely, the Government allowed the opera house in Brussels to stage a previously banned opera, *La Muette de Portici* by Daniel Auber, which referenced France's July revolution and contained rousing songs of nationalist fervour. Presumably they were hoping that it would encourage nationalist sentiments towards the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. They were wrong. As well as there being an undercurrent of political agitation, a poor harvest had left many working class people hungry, angry and volatile. By the time the opera reached its fifth act, the audience was in a lather of separatist fervour, on their feet and singing loudly. Some then stormed the stage to make revolutionary speeches, while others surged out to riot in the streets, singing and calling for insurrection. The authorities were completely unprepared and were taken by surprise; soon, riots had spread to Ghent, Bruges and other cities, making the whole region ungovernable. The Dutch army briefly managed to occupy Brussels again on 23 September, but within days a co-ordinated committee of revolutionaries and citizens' militias forced them to retreat, then transformed itself into a Provisional Government, which declared Belgian independence on 4 October 1830.

LEICESTER BALLOON RIOT

In the mid-19th century, ballooning was all the rage, so the promise of a test flight by aeronaut Henry Tracey Coxwell's new hydrogen balloon at the Order of Foresters fete in Victoria Park, Leicester, on 11 July 1864, attracted an excited crowd of 50,000. Coxwell had previously carried out test flights of his new balloon *Britannia* at Crystal Palace and Derby. As a result, in Leicester, expectations were high, particularly as for this flight he was to be accompanied by 13 paying passengers, including two women. A 15 acre compound had been fenced off for the flight, but the balloon was only separated from the crowd by a flimsy barrier.

ON SEEING IT DEFLATE, THE CROWD SURGED FORWARD AND ATTACKED THE BALLOON, TEARING IT TO PIECES

The flight was scheduled for 5.30pm, but trouble began in the early afternoon. Then, a man also claiming to be an aeronaut loudly proclaimed that Coxwell was cheating the spectators as *Britannia* was not his newest and biggest balloon but an older model, saying: "This Coxwell, he's taking us for mugs." This caused "a perfect sea of clamouring spectators" to break down the barrier around the balloon at about 2pm and demand he launch immediately. The situation was further inflamed when Coxwell's passengers forced their way through the crowd and occupied the balloon basket in a way that made it impossible for him to take off; in addition, the carpenters who were needed to release the balloon from its scaffold had not yet arrived. Once in the basket, one of the passengers further inflamed tempers by announcing that Coxwell was refusing to ascend, then went on to direct foul language and "gestures" at the assembled fete-goers milling about the compound. As this was supposed to be a sedate family event, there were only a few police on the site, but when they did eventually get to the balloon, they only made things worse by striking a woman on the head, knocking her to the ground bleeding. This truly ramped up crowd anger and people started throwing bottles at the balloon and shredding the mesh enclosing it. Coxwell then tried to defuse a situation that was rapidly spiralling out of control by threatening to cancel the flight and let the gas out of the balloon if the crowd didn't calm down and move back. They responded with verbal abuse, so he let the balloon down. On seeing it deflate, things really kicked off; the crowd surged forward and attacked the balloon, tearing it to pieces, while Inspector Haynes and Sergeant Chapman from the Leicester police attempted to get Coxwell to safety as the angry mob pressed in on them shouting "rip him up," "knock him on the head," and "finish him," and tearing his clothes.

Coxwell eventually found refuge in the nearby house of the Town Clerk while the angry mob set fire to the balloon basket and shredded the *Britannia*, going on to parade triumphantly through the city streets with the metal hoop that had supported the envelope, while quick-thinking individuals started selling pieces of the balloon as souvenirs. The *London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art and Science* described the rioters as a "horde of savages as fierce and untamed as South Sea Islanders and differing very little from them except in their habitat, which was at Leicester". Leicester attempted to palm off the blame onto day trippers from local rivals Nottingham, but this did not stick, and for a while Leicester inhabitants were derided with the nickname "Balloonatics".

These just scratch the surface: we might also consider the New York Doctor's Riot, prompted by body-snatching and an ill-advised joke; a riot at a football match that led to war between El Salvador and Honduras; and, of course, the Leeds Dripping Riot, sparked by an argument over beef dripping, and many more. What can be guaranteed is that given the right triggers, however strange, a crowd can riot over anything…

IAN SIMMONS is FT's news editor and the author of a forthcoming book about haunted London.

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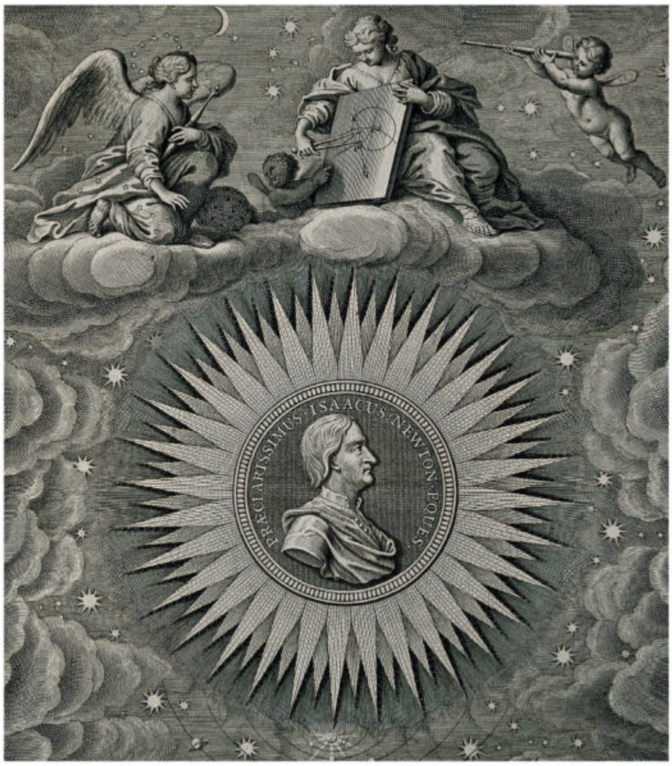
Newton and the Key to the Universe

Was Isaac Newton the first modern scientist or the last of the magicians? ANDREW MAY says that the distinction was a meaningless one in Newton's quest to uncover the hidden laws of the Universe.



WELLCOME COLLECTION

Modern science is inextricably linked to mathematics. I'm not just referring to numbers here – for example numerical measurements of things like time, speed and energy – although that's an important part of it. But equally important are algebraic equations: symbolic representations of the relationship between different physical quantities. Although these remain a closed book to many people, they're the reason NASA engineers can send a robot lander to Mars and tell us a year in advance exactly when and where it's going to touch down. On a more mundane level, it's only because the software is programmed with the correct equations that our smartphones and satnavs can use GPS signals to tell us exactly where we are.

This hasn't always been the case. From ancient times to the Middle Ages, mathematics was more closely associated with mysticism than science, while the latter was largely a matter of empirical observation with very little predictive power. The shift from "mathematics as mysticism" to "mathematics as science" happened fairly quickly in the 17th century – and it was largely down to one man, Isaac Newton, who happened to be both a mystic and a scientist.

Newton is best known for his work on gravity, and specifically for realising that the familiar pull we feel towards the Earth's surface is due to the same force that holds the Moon in its orbit. But he didn't just say this in words; he came up with a precise equation – an arrangement of mathematical symbols on paper – that predicts the strength of that force in any given situation. As great as his discovery of the law of gravity was, this was an even greater discovery: that you can make accurate predictions about the behaviour of the hitherto capricious and chaotic physical world simply by representing it in symbolic form on paper.

In hindsight, it's difficult to appreciate just how revolutionary this discovery was; it's been so successful that everyone takes it for granted now. But the situation in Newton's time was almost the mirror image of the present day. What is now seen as the rational, mainstream view – that the Universe obeys simple mathematical laws – would have seemed a bizarre and mystical notion then. As a result, many people see Newton as a man ahead of his time, with the mindset and approach of a modern-day scientist. But is that really the case? There's a less orthodox view – which personally I tend to agree with – that he was actually working within a much older tradition. As the economist and Newton scholar John Maynard Keynes put it, "Newton was not the first of the age of reason; he was the last of the magicians."

"Magician" in this context means someone who believes there is a simple, underlying code to the Universe – which, if discovered, would give one great power and knowledge. The idea that this code might be mathematical in nature can be traced back to its mystical roots in the teachings of Pythagoras and other ancient philosophers. By Newton's time, however, their views had long fallen out of favour. If their ideas were mentioned, it was generally to dismiss them as the musings of crackpots or dreamers. A similar attitude prevailed towards the Hermetic philosophers of mediæval Europe – a small and secretive minority who believed that, with sufficient diligence, it would be possible to discover a simple set of rules capable of explaining the complexities of the natural world.

It seems likely that, in spirit and outlook at least, Newton belonged to the Pythagorean/Hermetic tradition. It's often pointed out, usually with some embarrassment, that Newton dabbled in areas like alchemy and theology. But "dabbled" is an understatement; he spent far more time on these subjects than on the scientific work he's best remembered for. His world-view was driven by the fundamental belief that God created an ordered Universe, and he devoted his life to developing a better understanding of this process by every means available to him. As far as Newton was concerned, there was no meaningful distinction between his scientific work and his other activities. To quote Keynes again: "He looked on the whole Universe and all that is in it as a riddle, as a secret which could be read by applying pure thought to certain evidence, certain mystic clues which God had laid about the world."

It's a mistake to sweep Newton's worldview under the carpet simply because countless crackpots and nobodies have held similar views before and since. The fact is, he wouldn't have achieved what he did – and paved the way for our modern scientific/technological world – if he'd thought differently. His genius lay in the fact that he succeeded where so many others had failed; he discovered a key to the Universe that actually works.

Adapted from Andrew May's *Pocket Giants: Isaac Newton* (The History Press, 2015).

ANDREW MAY is a writer on science, military history, forteana, pulp fiction and other subjects. A regular contributor to *Fortean Times*, he blogs at: https://andrew-may.com/blog/and https://forteana-blog.blogspot.com/

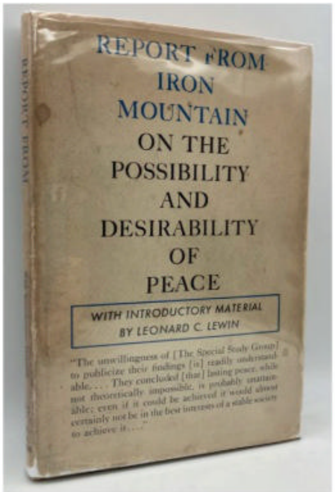
The hoax that would not die!

BRIAN J ROBB examines the notorious 1967 political hoax *Report From Iron Mountain*, a foundational document for the contemporary conspiracy-driven world.

In physics, the search is ongoing for the 'theory of everything', an all-encompassing coherent framework that explains all aspects of the Universe. There is a similar concept in conspiracy theory – could there be a single source from which virtually all modern conspiracies originated? The infamous 1967 anti-war satire *Report From Iron Mountain* may be the 'theory of everything' for the universe of conspiracy theories.

The assassination of US President John F Kennedy in November 1963 was ground zero for the unstoppable growth of conspiracy theories. Almost immediately, the idea that there had been a conspiracy – whether by the Mafia, the Cubans, the US Government, or some other unknown actors – to kill the President gained credence. The killing of suspect Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby only added to the notion that events were orchestrated. Writer Mark Lane was the first to raise the possibility in his December 1963 article "Defense Brief for Oswald" in the left-wing *National Guardian*. A book, baldly titled *Who Killed Kennedy?*, followed in May 1964 from Thomas Buchanan. Things quietened down following the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald acted alone. It wasn't until 1979's Committee on Assassinations officially stated there was evidence for multiple gunmen that the conspiracy theory business really blossomed.

In between came *Report From Iron Mountain*. Since the Kennedy Assassination, distrust by citizens of the US Government had risen, with the concept that an unelected elite were running things (today dubbed the 'deep state') gaining currency. Adding to this distrust came Leonard C Lewin's 1967 publication *Report From Iron Mountain*, subtitled "On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace". Purporting to be a leaked report compiled under Kennedy, it examined the implications for a transition from a wartime economy to "a condition of world peace". What would the social and economic impacts of such a significant change mean?


REPORT FROM IRON
REPORT FROM IRON MOUNTAIN ON THE POSSIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY OF PEACE
WITH INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL BY LEONARD C. LEWIN

The shocking conclusion was that peace would be inimical to the continued existence of the United States. In a state of 'global peace', something the generation that came of age in 1967 fervently hoped for, the American economy could be wrecked and the social order could collapse. War, in whatever form (most pertinently in Vietnam) must be perpetuated in order for the Government to maintain control over the ever-restless population.

Without an external enemy to fear and to hate (so the report claimed) there would have to be internal 'blood sports' (anticipating *The Hunger Games*) to control the nation's wayward young men who could resort to savagery without military discipline. Furthermore, without the loss of life in war, uncontrolled growth of the population could not be sustained, with eugenics or "a sophisticated form of slavery" (essentially mediæval feudalism) required. Without the constant threat of nuclear Armageddon (fuelling the Cold War) another method of "induced fear" would be needed, with the report speculating that a threat of environmental collapse might work or "destruction by creatures from outer space". The roots of modern environmentalism and ufology may be here…

Report From Iron Mountain created a sensation. It made front page news in the *New York Times*, and the paperback issued by The Dial Press became a best-seller. Naturally, there were some who were suspicious, but *US News & World Report* confirmed the document's authenticity, citing the testimony of an unnamed Government official who reported that when President Johnson read the report he "hit the roof" and ordered it suppressed. Under the headline "Hoax or Horror? A Book That Shook White House", that publication gave further credence with its reporting that US embassies were to deny that this was official US domestic or foreign policy.

Adding to the aura of authenticity was a review in the *Washington Post* by 'Herschel McLandress' in which the reviewer claimed first-hand knowledge of the report's origins. 'McLandress' claimed to have been a 'consultant' on the original report which had been compiled at Iron Mountain, a decommissioned mine near Germantown, New York, converted into an enormous storage facility (for important US Government records) and bomb shelter. In the book's foreword Lewin stated that the final meeting of the Special Study Group had taken place at Iron Mountain, hence the title.

It would take many years for the truth about *Report From Iron Mountain* to fully emerge. In February 1968 in a *New York Times* (*NYT*) diary item, Harvard economics professor John Kenneth Galbraith admitted to being part of the 'conspiracy'. He subsequently backtracked, pointing out: "I was in general a member of the conspiracy, but I was not the author. I have always assumed that it was the man who wrote the foreword, Mr Lewin." Harvard University graduate Leonard C Lewin was a labour organiser who, prior to Iron Mountain, had few significant credits to his name.

As with the questions surrounding the Kennedy Assassination, the questions around the authenticity of *Report From Iron Mountain* died down. It wasn't until 1972 and an essay in the *New York Times Review of Books* that Lewin confessed that the entire thing had been a hoax. At the time, the Pentagon Papers controversy was unravelling and Lewin cited that as his reason for coming forward, claiming that the latest leaks "read like parodies of Iron Mountain rather than the reverse. The satirical conceit has been overtaken by the political phenomena it attacked."

Although Lewin had been the public 'front man', the report had actually been the work of a group of left-wing satirists who wanted to see how far they could push the idea of a leaked official US Government publication that outlined outlandish ideas. Those involved, particularly the originator Victor Navasky, were connected to the political satire magazine *Monocle* (published irregularly between 1956 and 1965). Navasky had been a co-founder and editor of *Monocle* for the first five years. He was a highly-accomplished left-wing writer and editor (he died in 2023, aged 90).

Navasky had been inspired by a January 1966 *NYT* report that a dip in the stock market was attributable to "cutbacks in military production" that would "cause widespread economic dislocations", dubbed by Wall Street a "peace scare". From that single item, Navasky developed his provocative 'What if?' – what if the ideas of peace and prosperity were mutually incompatible; it would

FBI

LEFT: The aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. **BELOW**: Left wing writer and *Monocle* co-founder Victor Navasky originated the *Iron Mountain* project.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

never be possible under Capitalism to have both simultaneously.

Lewin, Navasky, two other *Monocle* editors, Marvin Kitman and Richard Lingeman, and economist Galbraith compiled *Report From Iron Mountain*. Editor-in-Chief of The Dial Press EL Doctorow agreed to publish the book as non-fiction, though he was in on the hoax (the marketing team had not been made aware). Galbraith lent further credence masquerading as 'Herschel McLandress' for his *Washington Post* review. (McLandress was a fictional character from Galbraith's 1964 satire novel *The McLandress Dimension*.)

That might have been the end of the saga in 1972, if it wasn't for the evident gullibility of the right-wing conspiracy movement in the US that developed following the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980. Ever since the Kennedy Assassination and Watergate in the mid-1970s, US citizens had learned to mistrust their government. Various enquiries revealed many of the activities of the 'secret state', including FBI attacks on the 'radical left' in the 1960s and 1970s, and the CIA's attempts at 'brainwashing' under MK Ultra. By 1980 American pollsters reported that 70 per cent of those asked suspected government did not act in the interests of citizens but instead served big business and the 'military-industrial complex'.

Report From Iron Mountain faded from view, going out of print in 1980. However, it resurfaced 10 years later in a pirated edition published by the far-right think tank Liberty Lobby through a publisher that specialised in antisemitic and white supremacist tracts. Once again, *Report From Iron Mountain* was promoted as a genuine government document, uncovered by far-right activists who claimed they'd republished it as it was in the 'public interest'.

A left-wing hoax became a defining text of the alt-right movement

Over the next few years, the illicitly-published report became a key text among far-right groups and militia movements in the US. This was fuelled further by the emerging Internet that allowed them to communicate covertly, spreading their new Gospel. According to 'believers', the document revealed the Clinton administration's true agenda. As the right-wing *Patriot Report* claimed (reported by the *NYT*), Iron Mountain revealed nothing less than "a conspiracy against the citizens" of the US. In 1991, it even influenced Oliver Stone's conspiracy-driven movie *JFK*, with Donald Sutherland's 'X' parroting the report's key findings.

Following the 1995 terrorist attack by Timothy McVeigh on a Federal building in Oklahoma City, the *Wall Street Journal* interviewed Texas militiamen, uncovering the key texts behind their movement – William Pearce's 'race war' novel *The Turner Diaries*, Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, and Lewin's *Report From Iron Mountain*. "This is the plan for the destruction of the US," claimed one militia member.

In 1996, the *NYT* reported that at least seven right-wing or anarchist Internet sites featured the text of *Report From Iron Mountain*, describing it as "a classic among militia groups, some of whose members believe it is a real government report that concludes that war is necessary for society to flourish". Lewin – quoted by the *NYT* – said: "The nutties out there are told by their leaders – who claim to have special knowledge – that this is a real government document because it fits how they view the government: wicked." *Iron Mountain* continued to gather new supporters in the alt-right, with Lewin's 1999 obituary in the *NYT* dubbing the book "the hoax that would not die". Lewin's work was cited in many books and papers that comprise the modern conspiracist canon. *Report From Iron Mountain* was referred to on the web site of the Oath Keepers, one of the groups that rioted at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Report From Iron Mountain was a foundation stone in the wide spread of conspiracism that fuels the American right. Even the admission that the work was fake only served to further drive its take up – obviously (for the alt-right), the claim of a hoax was an attempt to suppress it once more. Richard Hofstadter's 'paranoid style' in American politics has never been more applicable.

Lewin recognised the value in his *Report*, suing the publisher of the bootleg edition for copyright infringement. He won a settlement in 1994 and the book was re-issued in an authorised hardback in 1996 with a new introduction by Navasky that lifted the lid on the only 'conspiracy' involved – that of left-wing satirists who set out to lampoon the thought processes going on in the 1960s. Navasky was intrigued by how a satire created by the left had inspired the right to take it as a serious document. In an Afterword, Lewin reflected on the original project: "[It] is, of course, a satirical hoax – a fact not so obvious in 1967 and, disturbingly, still lost on some people today." A left-wing hoax had become a defining text of the alt-right movement. In large part, it was *Report From Iron Mountain* that gave rise to the conspiracy-driven world of today, reaching its apex (or, perhaps, apotheosis given it is about belief) in the ideas of the modern right, from the reactionary techno-utopian Dark Enlightenment to the 'network state', the UFO 'disclosure' movement, and cryptocurrency via 'Trumps' Troops' of QAnon, the Proud Boys, and the Oath Keepers. *Report From Iron Mountain* is the closest thing we have to a 'theory of everything' for the modern conspiracy world. The lesson is: be careful what you joke about...

For a review of Phil Tinline's new book *Ghosts of Iron Mountain*, see p.56.

BRIAN J ROBB is the author of books about Philip K Dick and JRR Tolkien, a founding editor of the Sci-Fi Bulletin website and a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

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Still living in the grey zone

Bob Rickard explores a vitally important study of ‘recollected experiences of death’ by those who have been there and come back, and on the transition from life to death

Lucid Dying

The New Science Revolutionising How We Understand Life and Death

Sam Parnia

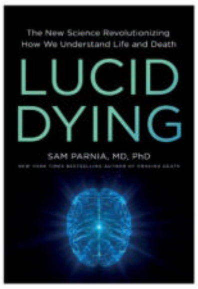
Hachette Books 2024
Hb, 352pp, £28, ISBN 9780306831287

In 1975, psychiatrist Raymond Moody published his first book on “out of body experiences” (OOBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs). It wasn’t the first such study, but the one that massively popularised the subject. In the 2010s, I remember reading the first excited discussions of Dr Sam Parnia’s clinical approach to the subject, telling of patients who, on recovering from surgical anæsthesia or after resuscitation from serious trauma, told of having remarkable experiences of extended consciousness. These were among the first tentative confirmations of NDEs from any specialist in intensive care resuscitations of the dying. Now, nearly two decades later, we have – as at least one reviewer has described it – Parnia’s *Summa.*

Lucid Dying is not yet another summary collection of near-death experiences (NDEs), though it does contain an impressive number of accounts of what Parnia calls “recollected experiences of death” (REDs). Its significance resides in his comprehensive account of medical research, conducted quietly by teams the world over, into understanding the nature of “one of the deepest and most fundamental issues underlying our society – the boundaries between life and death”, unpacking their breakthroughs and astonishing successes. Parnia’s own breakthrough began with his patients who were reporting conscious experiences when, medically, they were supposed to be incapable. More significantly, these experiences are largely unelicited and yet remarkably consistent in their details.

Parnia’s professionalism cannot be overstated. He is an associate professor of medicine at the Langone Medical Center of NY University, where he is also director of research into cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Before that, he graduated from medical schools in London and Southampton, specialising in cell biology. Then he directed the Human Consciousness Project at the University of Southampton. This is not declared boastfully but to illustrate the seriousness and dedication of Parnia and his colleagues – especially, he explains, when their findings directly challenge the orthodox understanding of brain death and consciousness.

The early chapters describe several different lines of laboratory research and the lightbulb moments that led to groundbreaking discoveries about the physiology and chemistry of dying. At the same time, Parnia and his medical colleagues were dealing daily with grim realities of their dying patients. The main story, though, is how these two approaches came together.


The New Science Revolutionizing How We Understand Life and Death
LUCID DYING
SAM PARNIA, MD, PhD
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ERASING DEATH

This convergence resulted in a gathering, in 2018 in Washington, of 18 of the world’s leading neuroscientists and ethicists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to consider the implications of work by Dr Nedan Sestan (among others) who had “successfully restored life to the brains of dead pigs”. Sestan’s team had developed a device called BrainEx which supplied the heads with a special sustaining blood-like fluid. The evidence showed that “pretty much all the normal functionality of the brain” slowly recovered, with no damage to the brain structure, or biological and chemical metabolism. Moreover, this revival had been successful sometimes “up to 14 hours” after the animals had died. They also found “electrical activity at cell connections,” says Parnia, “This was astonishing!” So is much else here, such as a paper in *Nature* reporting petri-dish regeneration of dissected human brain cells nearly 21 hours after death.

> *Many ‘dead’ people might simply be in a deep coma and consciousness can be restored*

To forestall – uselessly as it turns out – sensationalist headlines about Frankenstein-like experiments resurrecting corpses, the NIH announcements emphasised the clinical possibilities of extending the resuscitation period of dying organs. However, the teams went back to work with the most “unexpected” and “mind-boggling” outcome of the NIH initiative: the collective realisation that many “dead” people might simply be “in a deep coma” and that “consciousness can be restored with time”.

Parnia’s conclusion – the focus of the last half of the book – is that consciousness in the dying brain enters a different phase – he calls “hyperconsciousness” or the “grey zone” – a very different form of awareness involving an expanded sense of humanity and unity. That this involves little or no theological elements or divine entities will not be welcomed by any of the world’s religions. Most returnees report some kind of life review but, Parnia argues, Heaven and Hell seem to be your own dispassionate exam-marking of your own performance in life. No angels or devils are required.

In the hyperconsciousness state, he found, the life review facilitates personal restructuring. Many returnees confessed that they have been “changed” by their experience, expressing some gratitude for a second chance “to do better”. Spirituality becomes more humanistic (rather than religious), with many remembering a sense of expansion through time and space. This is supported by two rigorous surveys – especially AWARE-2 in 2023 (ie AWAreness during REsuscitation).

In the remaining sections, Parnia speculates about what these discoveries might mean, psychologically, sociologically and scientifically, including the difficult job of overcoming entrenched views of invested professionals. Hyperconsciousness, he suggests, may yet turn out to be some kind of electromagnetic-like flux.

Don’t let the difficult nature of his material dissuade you from reading this very important report. Sam Parnia is a very engaging and uncomplicated writer and anticipates many readers’ questions. If there is just one book to read on the inevitable transition from life to death, it is this one. I found it genuinely inspiring. Yet, oh dear! If ever a book needed an index, it is this one.

★★★★★

The art of the esoteric

Phil Baker examines a book on Crowley’s Tarot artist, and a ragbag of Crowley’s writings

The Lady and the Beast

The Extraordinary Partnership Between Frieda Harris and Aleister Crowley

Deja Whitehouse

Oxford University Press 2025

Hb, 242pp, £59, ISBN 9780197645147

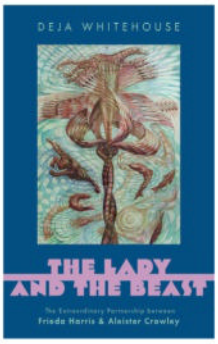
The Sword of Song

Aleister Crowley ed Richard Kaczynski

Inner Traditions 2025

Hb, 464pp, £75, ISBN 9798888501511

Aleister Crowley’s *Book of Thoth* (1944) is one of the two great 20th-century tarot decks, along with the Rider-Waite deck of occult scholar AE Waite and artist Pamela Colman Smith. Just as Smith has recently received more recognition in her own right, so now Crowley’s “artist executant” of the Thoth deck, Frieda, Lady Harris, has come into the limelight.


DEJA WHITEHOUSE
THE LADY AND THE BEAST
The Extraordinary Partnership between Frieda Harris & Aleister Crowley

Deja Whitehouse does an earnest job of considering Harris’s social class, lack of formal education and boring marriage to Liberal MP Sir Percy Harris, all background to uncontentious assertions that Crowley could not have done the Thoth tarot without her, and that she had genuine spiritual interests – she was a “seeker”, as Whitehouse puts it – extending well beyond Crowley. One chapter is specifically devoted to the deck. Sadly there is little illustration, and no colour at all: a pity, not for the tarot (readily seen on the Internet) but for Harris’s other, lesser-known works.

The book began as a PhD and would have benefited from editing, both for the occasional glitch (“Arthur Machan” [sic]) and for style, with endless “as noted above”, “as discussed previously” and so on. As for the friendship between the collaborators, Whitehouse largely misses out Crowley’s often funny vituperation (he in fact described Harris as “a dangerous lunatic, the most treacherous and deceitful person that I know”) as well as the rather moving extent to which she was loyal and caring to the end, holding his hands on his deathbed. In addition to Crowley, Whitehouse has interesting material on Harris’s later life in India, where she died, and this is a solid study of one of the relatively unsung women in 20th-century esotericism.

Aimed at the Crowley obsessive, Inner Traditions have done a magnificent job of re-publishing his book *The Sword of Song* (1904), complete with slip-case, rubricated text and 125 pages of endnotes. The contents are a strange ragbag of poetry and essays (all now available elsewhere) including his thoughts on Buddhism, GK Chesterton, Shakespeare, and the real meaning of ceremonial magic. In the introduction, Richard Kaczynszki makes the illuminating point that Crowley writes Victorian-style poetry not only in the manner of Algernon Swinburne, which is obvious and often pointed out, but also Robert Browning: a towering poet-sage for the Victorians but somewhat indigestible now. The poetry in this volume has a gymnastic prosiness, and one of its pleasures is watching Crowley find rhymes for such disobliging words as “Bishop”, “Chesterton” and “Aristobulus” (if you’re wondering: “(swish) up”, “ap-pre-ci-a-ti-on”, and “globule us”).

THE SWORD OF SONG
ALEISTER CROWLEY
CALLED BY CHRISTIANS
THE BOOK OF THE BEAST

Whitehouse ★★★

Crowley ★★★★★

Ghosts of Iron Mountain

The Hoax That Duped America and Its Sinister Legacy

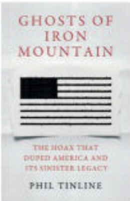
Phil Tinline

Bloomsbury/Apollo 2025

Hb, 336pp, £25, ISBN 9781035903849

War: what is it good for? Science and the economy. So goes the old, song-referencing joke.

This was also the argument of a spoof 1967 “US Government dossier”, *Report From Iron Mountain*, purportedly compiled by a crack team of hard-headed geopolitical thinkers like Henry Kissinger, but actually penned by a struggling novelist, Leonard Lewin, at the request of New York satire magazine *Monocle*, America’s equivalent of Britain’s *Private Eye* (a transatlantic merger was considered; combining *Monocles* and *Eyes* would naturally aid one another’s mutual vision).



The book “revealed” that, following WWII, the ominous Military-Industrial Complex truly ruled America, stoking the unnecessary Cold War for profit and power. A state of perpetual semi-war didn’t only boost the economy, keeping the masses employed in armaments factories, it also lent rulers a spurious “right to rule”.

The fake legitimacy of the tyrants in Washington over the hoodwinked populace could only be maintained by broadcasting alarmist images of a deeply exaggerated external threat from an all-powerful foreign enemy. If there was no Kremlin, Washington would need to invent it. And, just in case global peace really did ever break out, the Deep State had contingency plans ready to maintain the cosy status quo: fake alien invasions and illusions of planet-destroying climate-change.

The USA had to remain a warfare state, not a welfare state, in perpetuity.

Published anonymously, the book got good publicity, an extract appearing in *Esquire* magazine. Even President Lyndon B Johnson thought it *might* be real, officials taking some time to determine otherwise.

In an era of official lies about Vietnam, it found a receptive audience on right and left, before falling out of print… until director Oliver Stone used it as the basis for his 1993 Hollywood conspiracy hit *JFK*. Wanting to end war in Vietnam, Stone implied JFK had fallen foul of the *Iron Mountain* cabal who needed to keep it going, hence his murder.

Other 1990s conspiracists now thought the book real too, illegally reprinting the thing – as a genuine Government document, they reasoned it would be copyright-free.

The above story is very well told and researched by author Phil Tinline. But then, towards the end, whether through personal political preferences or simply to sell it to publishers as topical, he begins to somewhat exaggerate the hoax’s likely influence on contemporary right-leaning political groups like anti-vaxxers, climate sceptics, MAGA supporters, J6 rebels etc. I doubt Donald Trump has read *Iron Mountain* himself: it’s a book.

I’d have preferred to see 50-80 concluding pages chopped out and the original short *Iron Mountain* text reprinted instead: unfortunately, being wholly fictional, it really is under private copyright.

A good book, telling an interesting story, but with some dubious padding late on.

SD Tucker

★★★★

A Brief History of Nakedness

Philip Carr-Gomm

Reaktion Books 2025

Pb, 286pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781836390039

Philip Carr-Gomm begins *A Brief History of Nakedness* by distinguishing between nakedness (being unclothed) and nudity (being observed unclothed) – and then sensibly says despite this he’ll use the terms interchangeably throughout his book.

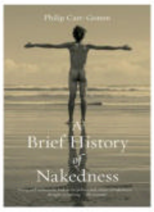
Carr-Gomm is best-known as the former leader of the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids (OBOD), one of the most respected Druid orders in Britain. His deep rooting in spirituality comes through strongly in his first two chapters, on nudity in religion.

Nudity was part of folk magic: to discover the identity of their future husbands, women ran naked around the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire; and “women would

walk, dance, sing and sometimes urinate in the fields, naked under the moonlight, to encourage the growth of crops".

"Skyclad" Pagans today can trace the practice back to the Jain religion. Less well known is that early Christians, following Jewish practice, would baptise new believers naked in a river or a dedicated pool.

Photographer Spencer Tunick is mentioned, of course. Nudity in the Arts and in protest is well-documented – as is, surprisingly, nakedness in politics. Striding naked across his room when visiting the White House, Churchill told Roosevelt: "The prime minister of Britain has nothing to conceal from the president of the United States." Other politicians have publicly used the same idea of being naked to show openness and complete transparency.



Carr-Gomm lists six reasons for stripping off: the sensual experience of, for example, skinny-dipping; lovers being erotically naked together; asceticism, mortifying the flesh by ignoring the needs of the body to be warm and protected; mysticism, to commune with the deity and Creation; functional – going to bed, having a bath, being examined by a doctor; and gaining attention through exhibitionism – the thrill of transgression for a streaker.

The first nudist club in Britain was in 1924; although they weren't members, Bernard Shaw and HG Wells were publicly sympathetic to nudism.

Two criticisms stop this book getting the five stars it richly deserves. First, this is a paperback edition of a hardback originally published in 2010. It would have been helpful if the author had either updated the book or added a new final chapter to bring it up to date; sadly neither occurred. He comments on Gok Wan's TV show *How To Look Good Naked*; what would his thoughts have been on *Naked Attraction*? Throughout the book he refers to "recent" examples of public nakedness – but they're in the first decade of this millennium (the "Noughties"!); at the very least these should have been changed by the copy-editor.

The book is profusely and superbly illustrated, with 143 photographs. It would have greatly added to its appeal (but probably also to its price) if there had been a fold of colour photos; instead they are all monochrome, and printed on the text page, which at times really diminishes the quality of reproduction; several are little more than a grey blur.

Having said that, this is an utterly splendid book, with fascinating and well-researched detail, and is a delight to read.

David V Barrett

★★★★

Abortion

A History

Mary Fissell

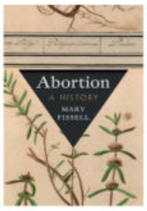
Hurst & Co 2025

Hb, 288pp, £25, ISBN 9781805262756

Is there a more fortean text than the Voynich manuscript? This enciphered European mediæval manuscript has held the fascination of scholars and publics alike for many a year, with numerous readings offered up to explain its contents.

One of the more recent – and convincing – interpretations came last year from historians Keagen Brewer and Michelle L Lewis, who argue that many of the manuscript's illustrations and ciphered text relate to women's reproductive health, particularly details on contraceptives and abortifacients.

The publication of Brewer and Lewis's research came too late for it to be cited in Mary Fissell's *Abortion: A History*. Unfortunate, as not only would their interpretation fit with Fissell's analysis of abortifacient herbs, but the enciphered nature of the Voynich manuscript speaks to a wider argument of Fissell's: that women have always sought to manage their reproductive lives, but evidence of such practices has often been hidden.



Fissell traces her narrative from the Classical period up to the 1973 Supreme Court Roe v Wade decision, which legalised abortion across the United States. She does so by taking one emblematic account per chapter, before pulling back to reveal wider social and cultural backgrounds of the time-period in question. In so doing, continuities with and differences from the present day emerge.

One major change is around notions of pregnancy itself: the common perception in the premodern world was that until "the quickening", when a woman felt movement within her, she was not deemed to be pregnant.

Fissell also argues that over the centuries, anxieties over abortion were not "centred around the fœtus" – whether through patriarchal societies punishing what were deemed to be irregular sexual practices; or as was the case in both elite Roman society and with slavery in the Early Modern Caribbean, where abortion was seen as an act of resistance against notions of property.

Whilst women have always sought to manage their reproductive lives, Fissell states that her history is not "a vast continuum of women helping women" – an important point and one particularly relevant to her chapter on Early Modern Europe, where the connections between midwifery and witchcraft are given a nuanced analysis and clichéd stereotypes are avoided.

Abortion: A History is written with an engaging clarity but also raises one of the trickiest of historiographical questions: how to write a history of a topic that by its very nature is often unrecorded?

Fissell analyses a range of legal cases for when abortion providers fell foul of the law. However, she rightly notes the many women across time who successfully ended their pregnancies but left no trace in the physical record.

A reminder that historians can decode much of the past, but some of it will always remain secret.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★

Fatfoot

Encounters with a Dooligahl

Neil Frost

Coachwhip Publications 2024

Pb, 718pp, £29.99, ISBN 9781616465933

If they have heard of the yowie, the Australian wildman, most people would think of it as some kind of primate, a kind of down-under yeti. Neil Frost challenges this paradigm in his new book, postulating that the yowie is, in fact, three distinct kinds of upright walking marsupial.

Many Australian animals are examples of convergent evolution, where similar environmental pressures in different parts of the world cause totally unrelated species to resemble one another.

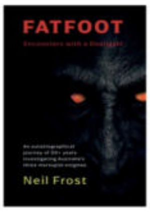
The book is a hefty 718 pages and the result of over 50 years of research by a highly competent biologist. It follows his experiences and those of his neighbours in the Blue Mountain with a yowie he nicknames Fatfoot.

Frost gradually came to the conclusion that there were three species involved, the 10-foot (3m) Quinkin, the seven-foot (2m) Dooligahl and the three- to four-foot (90-120cm) Junjudee. All are aboriginal terms.

He also concluded that they were marsupials using foot formation, lack of mammary glands and possession of the *tapetum lucidum*, a reflective layer behind the retina.

Interestingly other researchers have wondered at the variation in footprint shape and number of toes in yowie prints. Frost notes that the three species all have different foot formations. The animals are omnivores and active predators.

Frost feels that the ancestry of the Quinkin and Dooligahl evolved from the giant sthenurine kangaroos that walked rather than hopped. The Junjudee is from a separate line of marsupials.



Overall the book is fascinating and clearly written by a man of high intelligence and a dedicated boots-on-the-ground field researcher.

However, it needs some editing. One whole chapter meticulously reproduces his field notes: great for research but a slog when reading about every bush shake or dog bark recorded.

Overall this is a bold and detailed new examination of an ancient mystery from a new angle.

Richard Freeman

★★★★

We're not in Ambridge anymore

James Holloway enjoys a strong collection of folk-horror RPG scenarios drawing on the darker side of English village life

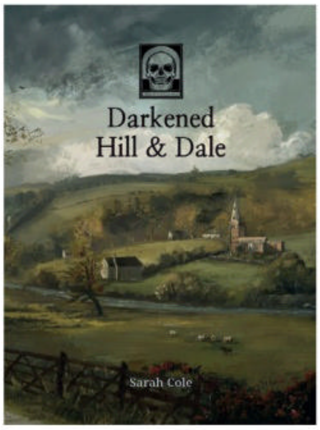
Darkened Hill and Dale

Sarah Cole

Patchwork Fez Games 2025

Hb, 152pp, £40, ISBN 9781068345203
(Also Pb £25, Digital £15)

Darkened Hill and Dale is a collection of seven folk horror scenarios for role-playing games, all set in contemporary Britain. The scenarios aren't designed for use with any particular game, so there's no system content here. Most are structured mainly as mysteries with the player characters potentially taking on roles ranging from private detectives to YouTubers presenting videos on the paranormal. This makes them well-suited for games where the default style of play is investigative, like *Call of Cthulhu* or *Fear Itself*.



The seven scenarios in *Darkened Hill and Dale* focus on different aspects of the horror of English village life (although the locations of the fictional villages are kept vague, most of the settings do feel specifically English). In "Roses Turned Red", the trail of a punch-up at a wedding that turned deadly leads to a garden centre, while in "Death Knell", determined locals try not to let the suspicious death of the vicar upset the celebrations surrounding their new church bell. "It Takes A Village" looks at the cost of even the most well-intentioned magic as a small community deals with a tragedy narrowly averted.

"Aurora Temporalis" is the most unusual of the scenarios, with a complex narrative structure that involves a time-loop in a remote area. "Fatstock" gets into the bloody celebrations of English rural life, with a livestock show tied to a bloodthirsty hunt, while "Moonlit Shadow" sees a group of metal detectorists attract the unwelcome attention of an Alien Big Cat that's genuinely alien.

Finally, "Fools' Fire" sees the investigators looking for a missing group of paranormal YouTubers in a misty, Dunwich-inspired landscape.

It's hard to judge how long each scenario would take to play, since systems vary so much, but each is self-contained and it's easy to imagine some of them being done in a single session or two at the most. They deal with a range of horrors and a range of levels of the supernatural: "Roses Turned Red" sits on the edge of the paranormal and could be explained away by weird science and the extremes of human behaviour, as could "Fatstock". "Moonlit Shadow" and "Aurora Temporalis" are a little more explicitly paranormal, with a bizarre alien creature and time travel respectively.

One nice thing about *Darkened Hill and Dale* is that it's a contemporary British horror setting created by someone who's obviously actually familiar with contemporary Britain.

The real-world setting is obviously heightened, but it's heightened in a way that feels authentic, from the food truck selling pulled pork sandwiches at the church fête to the "National Heritage" info boards around important locations to the ramshackle museum full of local cryptid sightings.

The contemporary setting also makes this a good set of scenarios to introduce horror fans to role-playing games; choose a simple system and start playing without any need to explain what happened to the moon elves during the Age of the Sundering.

Long-time players of games like *Call of Cthulhu* will be familiar with the tradition of handouts, copies of journal entries and newspaper articles and letters and so on that serve as clues in the investigation. *Darkened Hill and Dale* comes with a separate folder of these. In a pleasingly modern touch, many of them are printouts from email or web interfaces, making them fit very convincingly into the modern setting.

One hiccup is that although the handouts for each scenario are listed at the beginning of the section, they aren't cross-referenced in the text or reproduced in the book itself, meaning that if the gamemaster wants to look at the contents of the handout after handing it to the players, they'll need to have printed out an extra copy in advance (easy enough, since physical copies of the book come with a digital copy).

This little niggle is a good example of *Darkened Hill and Dale*'s one main drawback: its layout isn't really optimised for use at the game table. Key information isn't bolded or otherwise called out most of the time, and most character or location descriptions are written as descriptive paragraphs. It's a small point, but it does mean that scenarios will need a little more preparation than they might otherwise.

Despite this small reservation, *Darkened Hill and Dale* is a strong collection of scenarios, pleasingly varied while still unified in theme and style. If you play any modern horror RPG and are willing to put in a little work in preparation, it's well worth your time.

★★★★★

The After-Life of Brian

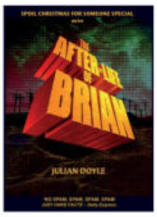
Julian Doyle

Self-published/Amazon 2024

Pb, 303pp, £12.04, ISBN 9781068746505

If you have a bee in your bonnet or an axe to grind, it's probably best not to write a book on it. And if it's on a controversial subject like reinterpreting the story of Jesus, and you have no scholarly qualifications in the field, then it's really not a good idea to self-publish.

Julian Doyle is a film-maker, and was the editor on the Python film *The Life of Brian*. There's no doubting his enthusiasm for rewriting the Jesus story – he's done several self-published books on the subject – but a lot of this one is simply a rehashing of the well-trodden work of Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, Lynn Picknett & Clive Prince, Margaret Starbird, Knight & Lomas and others, in most cases without any attribution or references; there isn't even a bibliography, let alone an index.



There's the raising of Lazarus being a masonic-type initiation; there's the Magdalene stepping off a boat in France; there's the heretical secrets of Rennes-le-Château; there's Jesus having a twin brother; there's the Cathars and the Knights Templar – all very familiar stuff that's been around in this field for decades. And like many books of this type, he tells us "to ignore the academics". Nuff said.

Unfortunately Doyle's arguments aren't always clearly stated, and are often undermined by chatty if not jocular writing and by unnecessary references to *The Life of Brian*; how many times do we need to be told that Brian, or perhaps Jesus, or even the author himself, is "a very naughty boy"?

The book desperately needed copy-editing to clarify his arguments, which flit around like sparrows from chapter to chapter. It would also have benefited hugely from proof-reading; there are typos on almost every page.

But if nothing else it's good to see that the spirit of *The Life of Brian* is still alive over 40 years later.

Jay Vickers

★★

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On sale 31 July in all the usual places or available to order now from:

shop.recordcollectormag.com

Restless spirits

A long-forgotten eighties oddity gets the deluxe treatment. See Pierce Brosnan, Adam Ant and Ted Nugent collide in a not-quite-horror film pitting an anthropologist against demonic LA street punks!

Nomads

Dir John McTiernan, USA, 1987
Limited Edition Blu-ray, £26.99

John McTiernan's feature debut, a largely forgotten horror movie from the 1980s, has been resurrected and given a full MOT and buff up by Treasured Films. Whether the film itself deserves the luxury treatment is another matter.

A French anthropologist living in Los Angeles (Pierce Brosnan, in his first movie lead role) becomes obsessed with a group of street punks he regularly sees around the city and develops a theory that they are the modern-day equivalent of the nomadic tribes he observed in North Africa and the Arctic. He comes to believe that, just as in the non-Western cultures he studied, some of them are malign spirits in human form, drawn to places where violent death has occurred.

An unusual premise, then, and an intriguing one. Perhaps fittingly, McTiernan chose to tell his tale in a similarly intriguing way. Brosnan dies in the first five minutes, but not before somehow passing his memories on to his doctor (Lesley-Anne Down). She experiences what happened to him through flashbacks, gradually piecing together what he was working on.

> *Led by Adam Ant, they wear awful clothes and listen to dreadful music*

Nomads isn't really a horror film and, as Kim Newman explains on one of the many extras, is something of an outlier when compared to the big horror films of the period – such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Fright Night* – which led to franchises. It's more of a mystery story, which the investigative nature of the narrative underlines. McTiernan is trying to elicit fear and suspense without recourse to violence or terror. Unfortunately, the one sequence which does properly evoke fear is the most conventionally 'horror' sequence in the film, where our hero encounters a sinister nun in a dilapidated building.

This lack of real scares throughout the film is mainly down to the fact that the antagonists, the street gang, can't really be taken seriously. Led by Adam Ant of all people, they wear awful clothes, listen to dreadful music, and are more of a nuisance – revving their bikes at all hours of the night – than a threat to life and limb. So lame are they that an ASBO would probably sort out the problem.

The music is a collaboration between Bill Conti, a purveyor of soundtracks to mainstream Hollywood pictures, and rock star Ted Nugent, the right-wing gun-nut's right-wing gun-nut. The resulting score is a bizarre cross between Tangerine Dream and squealing hard rock guitar, and it doesn't work at all. Quite how it was thought appropriate for what was clearly intended to be a thinking person's mystery is, well, a mystery.

The cast though is a genre fan's dream. Aside from the leads, we have the aforementioned Ant, cult favourites Frank Doubleday (*Escape from New York*, *Assault on Precinct 13*) and Mary Woronov (*Death Race 2000*, *Night of the Comet*), Frances Bay from numerous David Lynch projects, and veteran Nina Foch who was in some terrific noirs in the 1940s, notably Budd Boetticher's *Escape in the Fog*.

As the interviews and extras make clear, this was a production that encountered its fair share of difficulties. No one interviewed, be it Brosnan, Down, or Conti, is prepared to say they love the film and think it's great. Obviously, no-one trashes it, but the praise is faint. Lesley-Anne Down, for instance, remarks that she doesn't think McTiernan wanted her in his movie and was, at first, somewhat brusque with her. On the audio commentary, an almost monosyllabic McTiernan confirms that he had little say in casting decisions. The word is that Gerard Depardieu was first choice, which would have taken the film in a completely different direction. This commentary really does have to be heard to be believed, the interviewer struggling to get anything from the director. It reminded me of interviews I've seen with the late Ginger Baker, ex-Cream drummer and uber-curmudgeon.

Nomads is a curio, then, and a recommended purchase for those who either missed it first time or only have a ropey VHS or DVD. The film looks great in Treasured Films' brand new 2K scan and restoration. Furthermore, the disc extras shed some light on why *Nomads* is the way it is. Also in the package is a booklet with an excellent piece about Adam Ant, and some beautifully-produced art cards. Someday, all films – good or bad – will get a rerelease of this quality.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

TELEVISION

FT's couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** assess the small screen's current fortean offerings

Since 2020, a crack team of scientific researchers and weather-beaten ranch hands have been trying to solve the mysteries of a high strangeness hotspot in Utah. Some have called this area cursed, some have called it chosen; but one thing is for sure – it is ruddy peculiar. Skinwalker Ranch has been a hotbed of investigation into its bizarre properties for a number of years: strange lights, cattle mutilations and, well, skinwalkers (Navajo shapeshifters), all documented in six series of *The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch* (aka *Curse of* in the UK). The team – headed by hillbilly-voiced Travis Taylor, astro-physicist and owner of an unruly barnet, and immobile-haired Eric Bard, plasma-physicist and Ranger Smith impersonator – have been attempting to apply science to the phenomena, looking for data that might lead to some answers.

However, there is a suspicion that Skinwalker Ranch is not unique and that other ranches demonstrate similar oddnesses. Cue the imaginatively titled *Beyond Skinwalker Ranch* featuring former CIA agent turned ufologist Andy Bustamante and David Duchovny look-a-like Paul Beban, award-winning journalist and presenter of *Paranormal Declassified*. Bustamante, his trademark mane professionally restrained by an Alice band, and Paul, sporting a neckerchief and intelligent glasses, head off in an equipment laden 4x4 across the scrubby desert to other isolated farmsteads.

They set to work with their arsenal of gauges, meters, drones and rockets

First stop: the Thomas Miller Range, where we are introduced to Mr and Mrs Miller, a spritely, elderly couple who, having been expecting investigators, seem bemused to find a Brazilian footballer and a woggle-less scout-leader at their door. Nonetheless, they are soon regaling us with tales of decades-long and frankly harrowing unexplained happenings: mysterious lights, multiple cattle lost to classic mutilation, unexplained electrical effects and a blackspot road bridge with a shockingly high mortality rate. Beban and Bustamante set to work with their arsenal of gauges, meters, cameras, drones and rockets, gleaning some genuinely baffling readings, many of which uncannily mirror those found at the original Skinwalker Ranch, in particular the 1.6 GHz frequency that seems to be a commonality across all of the sites investigated and is – as Travis excitedly (and repeatedly) reminds us – is reserved for Earth-to-space communications.

Next the duo head to Fayetteville, North Carolina, to visit abductee Chris Bledsoe, who can seemingly summon UAPs to appear in the night sky at will. Exchanging his pointy hat for an EEG helmet and monitored by neuroscientist Dr James Thompson, Chris enters into a trance-like state and the celestial light show begins: viewers are treated to some incredible footage accompanied by equally impressive brain activity readings.

Three series in, and there is something for everyone, from poltergeist activity to ancient aliens; these ranches just keep giving, and whatever's going on, it's curiously compelling.

Dangerous Animals

Dir Sean Byrne, USA, 2025
Digital platforms

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the cinematic water, here's a new shark flick promising to be even more terrifying than… the last one; but, as is often the case, the horrors of the sea tend to arrive dead in the water.

Unlike most horror fare involving getting eaten by sharks, *Dangerous Animals* does not seek to demonise the much-maligned apex predators of the sea. Instead, the threat here comes from Jai Courtney's Tucker, a serial killer whose schtick is kidnapping tourists by way of his shark experience business in order to feed them to the ocean's most iconic predators, getting his kicks from filming his victims in distress as the sharks simply follow their instincts. However, when he abducts American surfer Zephyr (Hassie Harrison), Tucker gets more than he bargained for, as the strong-willed loner is not about to give up without a fight and the two are pitted against each other in a head-to-head battle of wills, wit and brute force that gives the sharks a run for their money.

Courtney clearly relishes playing an unhinged serial killer, making his turn as the antagonist entertaining by drawing inspiration from the likes of Robert Shaw's Quint from *Jaws* and Ted Levine's Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*. It's a performance that makes *Dangerous Animals* an improbable companion piece to 2025's Nicolas Cage vehicle *The Surfer* – another Ozploitation movie that does nothing positive for the image of Australian men.

Harrison makes for a compelling heroine with a rebellious will to live, joining the roster of contemporary final girls who are tough, capable and make good decisions, albeit this archetype leaves little for her to play with in comparison to the boundless lunacy Courtney taps into.

The film offers a decent amount of suspense mixed with restrained bursts of gore, and save for one bit of body horror that has the potential to churn stomachs, *Dangerous Animals* is not as bloody as one might expect, especially considering what the filmmakers could have gotten away with in a post-*Terrifier* horror landscape.

While many of its set pieces work as vignettes, the film as a whole suffers from uneven pacing and editing, which doesn't help a thriller with a modest runtime of 93 minutes. Needless meandering means the film risks squandering its more interesting elements; fortunately, these carry enough weight to save the movie from completely wasting its potential.

Uneven as it is, *Dangerous Animals* is unlikely to become a genre classic, but it's still leagues ahead of the majority of sharksploitation films; if you're looking for a disposable thriller with a mild gross-out factor, you could certainly do much worse than being lured in by this bit of shark bait.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★☆☆

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National Folklore Survey

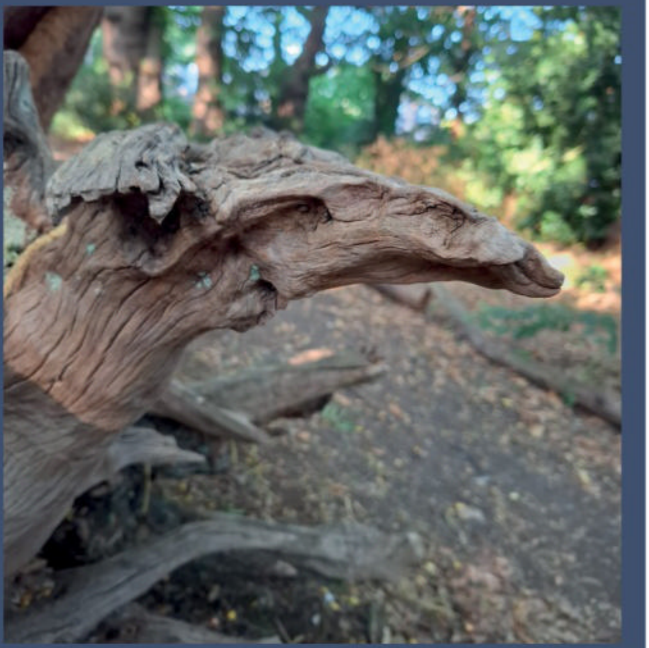
Marc Widdowson's claims that the National Folklore Survey for England project is "an attempt to discredit and diminish English culture and identity" [**FT458:63**] couldn't be further from the truth. The survey aims to uncover and understand the folk culture – the beliefs, values, traditions, stories – present and alive in England today to interrogate what is relevant and meaningful to its people. This will help us, we hope, in demonstrating the power and allure of folklore, raising the profile of England's folk culture, and offering practical means to those working with folklore, at a museum or gallery; as a cultural practitioner; or as a researcher. By working with Ipsos UK, we know that the survey responses will be truly representative, which is really exciting. Previous attempts at a national survey in England have garnered such volumes of material that it has subsequently been impossible to analyse and from respondents that are largely self-selecting i.e. people with an interest in or association to the subject matter, and restricted to specific geographic centres. We hope that our quantitative approach will turn this on its head. With interest in folklore at an all-time high, the survey is timely and much needed.

Marc Widdowson takes issue with our stance that people in England are confused or embarrassed about Englishness, and we have experienced this first-hand during the process of generating the questions for our survey. Our draft questions about Englishness proved most contentious with our focus groups, consisting of colleagues, students and the general public, and required careful consideration. For too long, Englishness has been marred by association with the far-right, and seen as exclusive and even hostile. We met people who were proud of their beliefs and practices that they felt were representative of their cultural heritage, yet careful or even reticent to align this with Englishness. We hope that projects such as the National Folklore Survey for England will help develop an idea of what Englishness in the twenty-first century is, or at least, what contemporary English folklore might be, so that people are more comfortable in expressing and articulating their national identity.

For more information about the National Folklore Survey for England, please visit our website: https://www.nationalfolkloresurvey.co.uk/

The National Folklore Survey for England project team,
Sheffield Hallam University and University of Hertfordshire

SIMULACRA CORNER



Zoe Manlow spotted this creature in High Broom Woods, Kent, and it reminded her of a Hippogriff... "maybe seeking shade out of the too-hot sun."

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Dragons

Alan Lewis seems not to have read my article on the Waverley Abbey dragons very carefully [**FT458:68**]. He seems to think that I am suggesting a flesh and blood animal is behind the sightings. I actually take pains in saying that I think modern dragon sightings are paranormal manifestations, perhaps the most ancient of paranormal manifestations.

As for a red kite being behind the sightings, again in the article birds are rejected. When I first got involved in the case I was near as damn it sure that the witnesses had seen a large bird like a heron flying at night. But when I interviewed them they all said that the creatures had no feathers and the wings were ribbed and bat-like. The largest of them had a wingspan of 10 metres (33ft)! When caught in torchlight they were silvery in colour. Does that sound like a red kite? No it does not, nor indeed any other bird.

But the thing I take issue with the most is the assertion that the witnesses have 'mental illness'. I've interviewed five of the 10 witnesses and all were perfectly sane. People throughout the world report encounters with strange things, UFOs, sea serpents, ghosts, faeries and much more. Are they all to be branded insane because they don't conform to Lewis's narrow world view? And are dragons any more fantastical than any of the above? People have been encountering them for 75,000 years.

Lewis also throws shade on the FT crew for printing the article and me for writing it! *Fortean Times* is a magazine about unknown phenomena and the human experience of it. In fact I wonder what business such a closed-minded man has in reading the magazine.

And as for the difference between a hallucination and a tulpa, 10 people all saw the same things, things that interacted with the surrounding environment. Be they tulpa, interdimensional entities or some other kind of paranormal manifestation, dragons are no hallucination.

Richard Freeman
Zoological Director, Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

Fortean Ethics

Regarding the letter entitled 'Fortean Ethics' from Alan Lewis [**FT458:68**]. To a certain extent, I can sympathise with the big question: "Are we encouraging hoaxing attention-seekers or opportunist profiteering by employing a too-relaxed and uncritical approach to some witness testimonies and the commissioning of related reports?"

Let's face it – people have many reasons to submit stories, articles and reports to a publication. Some noble, some venal, and some more a need for an outlet for their experience. Because of this, it's hard for any publication to assess a submission. Where an article is *commissioned* then there is – by dint of professionalism – a need to assert guidelines and critical analysis, of course. But when it comes to voluntary submissions, then the editorial team have the duty to examine them to check for content, suitability, and syntax/grammar. It isn't up to the editors to confirm details, examine evidence, or even question the motives of the contributor.

While *FT* can be considered rightly an authoritative publi-

Crypto correspondence

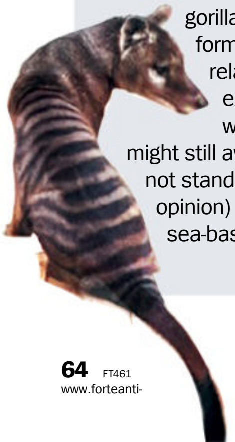
Pop goes the cryptid

I really enjoyed reading Sharon Hill's article 'Pop goes the cryptid' [**FT458:47**] for really highlighting a current trend in cryptozoology – a sustained shift from the 'zoology' towards the 'crypto'. To be fair, as a more or less lifelong armchair cryptozoologist, this is a trend I've witnessed developing for many years – it's just accelerated recently. In the same FT, Richard Freeman's excellent 'Fabulous Animals Unearthed' article very much echoed my own childhood experiences.

Like Richard, my interest in cryptozoology was born out of watching TV shows that added to an already established interest in wildlife. Apart from an avid interest in the increasingly complex study of hominology (almasty, yeti, sasquatch etc.), my interest in cryptozoology is almost entirely set within the zoology field. I find reports of sightings and searches for the thylacine (below), saola and pink-headed duck far more interesting than reports about Mothman for example.

Mixing within fortean circles, I typically find very few others interested in the zoology side of things. Cryptozoology has always been a broad church, forteana a much broader church, so I get it; catching the interest of everyone is impossible. I've attended a few events where I've been thoroughly fascinated by 'zoology'-focused cryptozoology presentations and have watched fellow forteans slip away or take a discreet nap. I mean, I have no problem with it – I'm much the same if I find myself at a fortean event where the presentation is about ghosts or witchcraft. It's not about the quality of the presentations, they're usually excellent: I'm just not interested in the subject matter.

I'd love a pure 'zoology'-focused cryptozoology conference, but there probably aren't enough of us, what with mainstream zoologists giving even the most uncontroversial aspects of cryptozoology little or no attention. At the same time the 'zoological' cryptozoologists have often not helped themselves. Many of them have been referencing for decades the fact that the giant panda, mountain gorilla and okapi only came to formal scientific recognition relatively recently. Using these examples as evidence as to why large vertebrate species might still await discovery really does not stand up well any more (in my opinion) – I make an exception for sea-based cryptids.



MARINKO BABIĆ / CREATIVE COMMONS

Sharon Hill's article then goes on to talk about the embracing of cryptids by the LGBTQ+ community. This is something I was not aware of, but as she points out it makes sense because it celebrates 'otherness' and diversity. *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who* and indeed most 'space' shows have always had a disproportionate LGBTQ+ following, so I get the interest in cryptids as an extension of that. Similarly, last year I went to Oxonmoot, the annual meeting of the Tolkien Society, and was surprised (pleasantly) at the large numbers of LGBTQ+ conference attendees.

Finally I just want to mention the 'age of TikTok': as a kid growing up in the 1980s and a young man in the 1990s it was *really difficult* to find any books or information about cryptozoology. When I did find them, I read them over and over – Janet and Colin Bord's *Alien Animals* springs to mind. As more public interest developed in cryptozoology more books appeared, but doing the research and actually writing a book takes time and dedication. I'm not saying every online cryptozoology article/organisation is worthless (I can name some that I think are great), but they're comparatively so much quicker for any ill-informed attention-seeker to produce than putting a book together. Where goes cryptozoology now?

James Newton
By email

Sea Creature

Re [**FT458:36-41**] The Deerness Mermaid: this interesting article reminded me of an unusual paragraph in the little-known, very down-to-earth (or rather down-to-sea) life story of a fisherman on the seas around the coast of Scotland after WWII:

"One particular day that always sticks in my memory was in the summer of 1952 whilst we were steaming from Ullapool, along with five other driftnet boats, making for the Handa grounds off Cape Wrath. We were inside the boat when crossing the deep water off Loch Inver on a beautiful calm day in June, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, when one of the crew saw a strange creature with a head on a long neck, at least three feet long, above the surface. I can only describe the head as being similar to a seal's, but much larger and having that distinct neck. We decided to attempt to lasso it and I and one of the crew each made one, then we slowed the boat down and approached the creature to within a few yards, but both attempts missed and it dived down, giving us all a clear view of its body.

The creature was about 18 to 20 feet [5.5-6m] long, had large flippers, one on each side, a grey/brown/black body with a white blotch on its side. It reappeared on our port side and as before dived under again on being approached. In all we made four or five attempts to catch it, and the nearest boat on our offside, the *Marguerite*, called us up on the WT enquiring if we had a man overboard as we had been circling so much. My father reassured him that all was well and then told us to forget what we were trying to do as we were only wasting our time. Catching herring was what we should be interested in.

This I well understood was our main priority, but to this day, 45 years later, I have never had any enlightenment as to what the species might be. Compared with the Loch Ness Monster, towards which I have always had a very cynical attitude, this was a real creature which had been observed by all the crew."

Skipper's Yarns from Avoch by Donald Patience, 2010 (ISBN 978-1-905787-51-7)

Tim Williams
By email

Deerness Mermaid

I enjoyed Simon Young's comprehensive article on the Deerness Mermaid. Reading the eyewitness descriptions made me think that the Mediterranean monk seal (pictured above) is a candidate. Historically recorded no further north than Brittany, behaviour and appearance of this species agrees with much of what was recorded at the time. I guess this would be the phocine equivalent of a black-browed albatross amongst North Atlantic gannets or a grey whale sighting in South Africa, but these sightings have happened.

Peter Acton
Nottingham

cation, it's not a peer-reviewed academic reference work, such as the *Lancet* etc. They can't afford investigators to confirm information, track down independent witnesses, examine the presented work in a tribunal. They can only publish and wait for someone else to make the effort… such as the correspondent Alan Lewis. In this, I found his general analysis reasoned and with basis. But, then again, I've never been *in situ*, so there you are. You might end up with someone confirming the facts then someone else confirming the confirmation of facts etc. etc. *ad nauseum*.

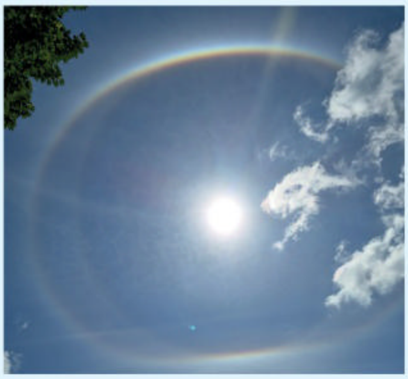
I have, however, time and again defended the critical analysis of forteana that has been presented as a fait accompli! *Having an open mind isn't the same as being completely accepting of accounts or proposals!*

If an uncanny, outstanding, or bizarre occurrence is reported, that report deserves questioning. If under 'examination' some elements remain unexplained then the phenomenon remains… fortean? The advent of social media has given birth to hundreds of thousands of outlets for fantasists, fiction-writers, the gullible, those who wish for the bizarre to be explained, and, of course, those who want publicity or profit. Consider what 'Creepypasta' is: online horror//fantasy stories presented as fact. In the old days, the author would have to sell it to a publication – now you can just upload and sit back to watch the reception.

I guess, my point is that *FT* is an outlet, not an arbiter. It doesn't encourage what some might qualify as kooks or con-artists. These probably use the many other outlets for their production as well as our beloved magazine. 'We' are not encouraging attention-seekers since there's plenty of others less… er… discerning. I find that many, who expect to be believed with open minds or arms and are then questioned, with reason, just get angry and take their snake-oil/beliefs/assertions elsewhere – usually in a huff!

It seems to me that the 'ethics' of publishing forteana – or rather the reporting standards of it – is worthy of discussion, perhaps a *Forum* piece? I'm happy to be commissioned.

Alan Cassady-Bishop
Bridlington, Yorkshire



Annular Rainbow

I've no idea how common these are, but it's the first time I've ever seen one! This was in Hertfordshire on 7 May 2025.

Jane Dickenson
Dudswell, Hertfordshire

Zizians and autism

I read with Interest the second article about the Zizians [**FT459:44-47**], but I do have a problem with the neurodivergence conclusion. Noel Rooney's view of autistic people is simplistic, stereotyped and years out of date. It is, I agree, highly likely that Silicon Valley is full of neurodivergent folk. I would be surprised if they were primarily autistic though, but a mix of folk of different diversities including ADH, dyspraxia, dyslexia etc as well as neurotypicals.

I am autistic, only recently diagnosed for something I suspected all my adult life but had not had the headspace to pursue. My own workplace, a hospital ward, is full of neurodivergent staff. My boss is dyspraxic, a former colleague is ADHD, and to quote the GP I went to see when asking for a diagnosis "so many doctors are autistic". My colleagues, care assistants and nurses have family members (children) with neurodivergence, which most likely means they are too, as current thinking is that it's inherited.

Anyhow, neurodivergence, and autism in particular, often comes with a need to be fair, to explore different sides to any story, to seek out verification from reputable sources. It does not make one more credulous than a neurotypical person, and any person can be sucked in to a cult, or into a relationship with an abuser. Abusers and cult leaders use the same tactics to target people – love bombing, social isolation, restriction of freedom, setting impossible goals so the target is forever trying to please, playing the victim so the abused person feels they have to rescue them, making the target feel responsible for them – it is like trying to feed a black hole. Sadly, no person, whatever their intelligence or diversity, is immune from being targeted by an abuser.

To learn more about autism, please read Dr Luke Beardsmore's books about and for adults and teens. He runs an MA and a Level 3 course (sadly out of my price range) about and for autistic folk at Sheffield Hallam University. It's also worth watching *A Kind of Spark* on CBBC about a neurodivergent family in an English village; and Channel 4 drama *Patience* has an autistic lead character. Being telly drama there are some stereotypes as shorthand, but I found them to be sympathetic on the whole.

Betty
Swadlincote, Derbyshire

Probability

Thanks as always for an entertaining and informative edition of *Fortean Times*. I've been reading FT since issue 30 and hope to be doing so for many more years to come.

In 'It Happened to Me' [**FT458:66**] Barry Cross tells how he and his daughter were seated next to his wife's cousin and her sister at the Hammersmith Apollo, having bought tickets separately and at different times and asks, "what were the odds on that happening?"

To calculate the odds, you first need to know the number of seats (which according to the Hammersmith Apollo website is 3,655). You then need to calculate the total number of ways to choose two seats from this number (about 6.7m). The next step is to work out how many pairs of seats are adjacent. The Apollo has 58 rows of seats according to their seating plan. Applying an average of, say, 50 seats per row (which is an estimate for ease of calculation because the number of seats in each row in the stalls and circle decreases, the further back you are in the auditorium. There are also two or three aisles cutting across these rows which reduces the number of adjacent seats.); this would mean there would be around 2,900 adjacent pairs. With this information, the probability that two people who know each other and bought tickets separately will sit next to each other can then be calculated by dividing the number of adjacent seats (2,900) by the number of ways to choose two seats (6.7m), giving odds of the order of 1 in 2,300.

The chances of Mr Cross sitting next to a relation at a particular concert is therefore quite remote. However, given the number of gigs, concerts, plays or other events happening each day across the UK, the number of people who attend these and the possible different relationships between people (from close family to mere acquaintances) that would result in recognition of the person in the next seat, the chances of someone somewhere sitting next to an individual known to them are much higher. In fact, it happened to me at a Divine Comedy gig which a friend and I travelled down from Leeds to London to attend and found ourselves sitting next to friends who had moved to London years ago and unknown to us had also bought tickets.

What happened to Mr Cross is a good example of the Law of Large Numbers at work, i.e. if you have a sufficiently large sample, even the most improbable things will happen. Another instance of this law in action is the chance of winning the jackpot on the National Lottery. The chances that you personally win the jackpot in any given draw is about 1 in 14 million, i.e. vanishingly small. However, the chances of someone (but not you) winning the lottery are pretty good as evidenced by the fact that someone does win more or less every week with thousands of people having won the jackpot since the lottery started in 1994.

So let's still be amazed by improbable events when they happen to us, but not surprised by the fact that they happen at all.

Chris Owen
Doncaster, South Yorkshire

LETTERS

Walter Haut

May I add to Nigel Watson's (in my opinion) rather cynical account of Lt Walter Haut's deathbed affidavit, concerning his knowledge of the Roswell incident? **[FT459:28]**

This is, of course, old news. Haut (Roswell air base's press officer, who was responsible for the initial press release about a captured flying disc) made his affidavit in 2002 and it was published in full in Don Schmitt and Tom Carey's 2007 book, *Witness to Roswell*. Schmitt and Carey knew Haut well and kept in touch with him for nearly 20 years, during their Roswell investigations. Haut said very little in his own lifetime about what he personally knew about the Roswell incident. Schmitt and Carey believe that this was because he had promised his close friend, Colonel Blanchard, (the Roswell base commander), that he wouldn't say anything. Haut had a long association with Blanchard from the time when they both played key roles in the 1946 Bikini Atoll nuclear tests.

The Affidavit is a valid legal document and was released with the full permission of Haut's family. I have not heard that it was composed by Schmitt or that Haut was confused prior to his death. Even so, Haut's denial to Larry King is perfectly in line with his pledge to Blanchard.

I hope that this gives a more rounded picture of Walter Haut's contribution to the Roswell debate.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

Hedgehogs/dreams

Re hedgehog diet **[FT459:25]**: While hedgehogs' diets consist mainly of small invertebrates on mainland Britain, as Mat Coward notes, they are opportunistic feeders, so after being introduced to South Uist in 1974, they developed a taste for the eggs and chicks of ground-nesting birds. Not being native to the islands and having fewer predators there, they soon spread across the Outer Hebrides. This has had a significant negative impact on bird populations across the islands and conservationists are working to remove them from the islands.

Re hypnagogic states/memory: To add to the experiences shared by other readers on hypnagogic states, I too have regular experiences of hearing my name, seeing faces, flashing lights and my head exploding. Alongside these are some rarer experiences that feel as if they have a deeper significance. I have occasionally had highly immersive visions of indescribably complex geometric patterns, all rotating together in a gear-like mesh. I have also experienced seeing dozens of unknown symbols spinning in front of me and on one occasion, it was as if they were written on a wall in a dark room and someone was moving a torch around the room, illuminating the symbols within the beam.

Something else I experience, usually while preparing for sleep, but also while fully awake, is dream flashbacks. Like most people, I remember dreams on waking, then forget them after a few minutes. However, I often spontaneously start having flashbacks of multiple past dreams. These tend to be thematically linked, usually by setting, i.e. trains, mountains, houses, and different dreams start flooding back, as one will somehow trigger the memory of another. It amazes me that, far from being forgotten, there are hundreds of dreams that are stored in my head somewhere, but that can only be accessed at certain times. Are there any other readers who experience this?

Simon Joy
Sheffield, South Yorkshire

PILCHARD INN
BURGH ISLAND
1336

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PILCHARD INN
AR

Pilchard Coincidence!

I do love a good coincidence and here's one that just happened to a friend and me. On Sunday 15 June this good friend of mine was at a local shindig near to where his parents live in Devon and the band were playing old sea shanties from that part of the world. One song was based on the once-thriving pilchard industry there. As he listened, my friend knew he had once come across a pub called The Pilchard Inn but for the life of him could not remember where it was.

The *very next day* (16 June) I sent him a picture of the beer I was enjoying in my garden over 6,000 miles away in Thailand. The reason I did that was because I was drinking from a pint pot I had gotten when I had spent a memorable day with him in Devon in 2019. The name on the pint pot? The Pilchard Inn, which is on Burgh Island, Bigbury On Sea, Devon, the very place he had been trying to remember!

Duncan Kaiser
Phuket, Thailand

Lucid Dreaming

The Ghostwatch section on lucid dreaming **[FT458:16-18]** prompted me to relate my first and only experience. It occurred a few months ago. I dreamt that I visited the offices of the large national company where I worked for many years. I don't know the purpose of my visit, but I was assigned a desk, and hung my jacket on the chair. At some point I got up for some reason, perhaps to visit the toilet, and when I came back every desk was occupied and it wasn't clear which was mine. I thought I would have to search for my jacket, when I suddenly realised it was only a dream, so I wouldn't need to bother. I wandered around the building for a bit, then decided to go home. I didn't have the money for the bus, as that was in my jacket, so I started walking home. As I walked along I remember thinking that this dream was going on for a long time, and that perhaps it was now past the time when I would normally wake up. I wondered if my body was lying in a trance at home, and I resolved to ask my wife about it when I got home. I don't normally remember dreams in such detail, or for any length of time, but this one stuck.

Dave Miles
By email

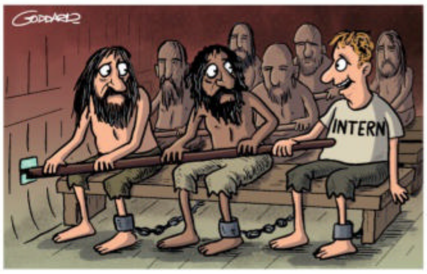
Alan Murdie mentioned a website on lucid dreaming **[FT458:16-18]**, which I visited, and it suddenly struck me, as it was geared to wish fulfilment: could this explain near-death experiences? Not saying it does, but it made me wonder.

Tony Sandy
By email

Appeal

I'm seeking anyone who might be able to provide information about the ghosts at the old RAF Bircham Newton base (now the Construction Industry Training Board) in Norfolk. I'm especially keen on anyone who might have seen the BBC *Nationwide* broadcast from late 1971/early 1972 or heard the site mentioned on the Jack de Manio or *Today* radio shows at the time. I've exhausted many of the obvious sources, like coverage in the *Psychic News* magazine and local press.

Paul Lee
paul@paullee.com



"It's not a paid position but I'm gaining valuable experience of the rowing sector"

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

My father and synchronicities

My father died in the first week of January this year, 2025. We both shared a love of *Fortean Times* for over 30 years, and he had once been published in your letters page. I would like to recount an odd tale that happened in the week he was in the hospital dying. Now, my father often would talk about the Universe illustrating things for him where he would hear something or read something, and then it would appear. A good example of this was when he was listening to a news item on the radio in the car about a change in benefits for disabled servicemen, and at that exact moment a man in army uniform and one leg, stepped out on the zebra crossing in front of the car, got to the other side and promptly dropped his wallet, effectively illustrating the whole news story.

I was with Dad the day we were watching some adverts and he asked if the music used was Duran Duran, to which I said, no, I think it's Spandau Ballet. He was not convinced. We changed the channel, and there was Duran Duran in a clip from *Top of the Pops*. We laughed at the coincidence, changed the channel again, and there was Spandau Ballet singing the song from the advert on a TV chat show. It was as if the Universe was saying, no, that's Duran Duran, but this is the band you need.

Other smaller instances would happen throughout our lives, but in the week my father was actively dying it felt as if I could not turn on the TV, or read anything without being reminded of what was going on and that I was going to lose my father. While looking up food on the Olio app I came across some Santa statues being given away. My father had more than a passing resemblance to Saint Nick and these statues seemed to me to be mini-illustrations of him, with one featuring Santa with a book and a pint, unusual for Santa, but perfectly fitting for my Dad. Another was Santa making soup, which was what my Dad was doing the last time I saw him. We collected them. They were strangely comforting.

BAKED IN BRITAIN
I'm New
L8IA BEST 008 BEFORE 15JAN2025
4 DINO CRUMPETS

NEWFOODSUK / FACEBOOK

The news headlines came on and stated that dinosaur footprints had been discovered in my father's home town

However, not too unusual, it was just after Christmas after all. I would accept that in times of heightened drama you are acutely aware of things that normally you would not notice, and the imminent death of a parent does focus the mind. However what happened next seemed so unlikely, abstract and unusual I have to wonder. The following day on the way to Aldi I mentioned the odd coincidences to my husband and mentioned the car radio story. The news headlines came on, and stated that dinosaur footprints had been discovered in my father's home town, something he would have been very interested in if he wasn't under sedation in a hospital bed. I thought to myself, OK Universe, prove this is a real thing and illustrate that to me. I then looked around half expecting, and half fearful that someone in a dinosaur costume would step out in front of the car, but nothing happened, and we got to the supermarket. The first section was the bread aisle, and the item that jumped out at me straight away was some Dinosaur Footprint Crumpets. I have never seen that product before or since.

Alexa Wignall
By email

The last goodbye

My father grew up in a small town in North Dakota. He spent his childhood summers on his grandfather's farm, just outside of an even smaller town about 12 miles [19km] east of his hometown. He so loved his summers there, playing with his cousins, spending time with his grandparents, and pranking grandfather's farm hand that he considered the farm his second home. To travel to the farm, he often took the train that ran across the state and stopped in both his hometown and the one near the family farm. In fact, he often rode the train by himself as a young boy; something that would be unheard of today.

As part of his final wishes, Dad asked that some of his ashes be spread on the family farm. Specifically, he requested that they be scattered across the small rise below where the farmhouse (long since razed) stood and overlooked the train tracks about three quarters of a mile distant (but visible). Last summer, after getting approval from a cousin who now owns the land, I drove out to fulfil my father's wishes. Very early one June morning, on what was Dad's birthday, I ventured onto the land and scattered his ashes. After spreading the last handful, I stood still and watched the Sun slowly rise and break through the early morning clouds. As I was looking towards the tracks, I saw a passenger car of a train go past (and only the passenger car), heading west. The Sun shone off the silver of the passenger car and seemed to cause a glow within the car itself. I suddenly knew that Dad was in the car and waving to me. I waved back and the car was gone. The entire event was utterly silent, except for a lazy breeze rustling the crops. Although I was crying at the sadness of it all, I knew Dad was at peace.

John Tripp
By email

Mystery taxis

Reading the reports about mystery broadcasts [**FT455:62, 457:63**] reminded me of the following.

In the early 1970s I was working in a solicitor's office as an audio typist. It was a small office with two secretaries and one solicitor who would dictate letters etc on to tapes which we would then listen to through earphones. We started to hear taxi service calls interrupting the dictation like 'pickup from the hospital', 'No 20 The Avenue to go to Brighton' etc. and we realised it was coming from a taxi company nearby. We asked them about it and asked if they could use a different shortwave band. The manager said we should put tape players on biscuit tins – which we thought sounded odd but this cured the problem!

Susan Jefford
Colchester, Essex

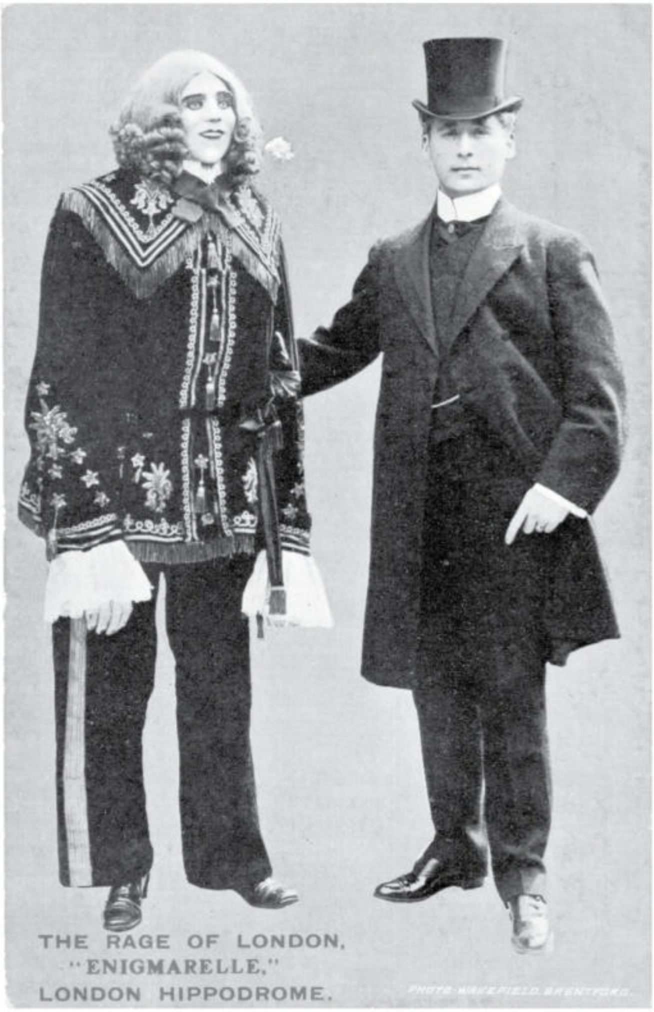
PECULIAR POSTCARDS

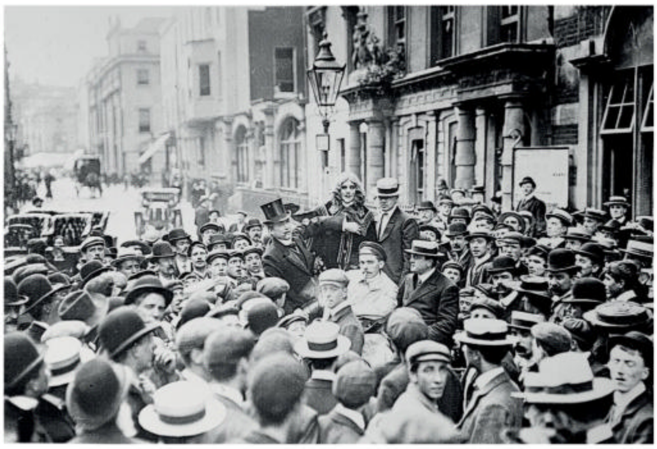
JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past tells the extraordinary story of Enigmarelle, the robot hoax that fooled the world

55. ENIGMARELLE, AUTOMATON MYSTERY

In August 1904, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and other New York newspapers could announce that a unique and novel attraction had come to town: Enigmarelle, the 'Automaton Mystery'. This extraordinary contraption, a mechanical robot able to walk, ride a bicycle, and sign its name, was to perform at Hammerstein's Paradise Roof Gardens. The audience was quite flabbergasted when they saw the ludicrous figure, more than six feet tall and equipped with a hideous waxen head surrounded by long curls, walk stiffly and jerkily around the stage, with a strange whirring sound emanating from the machinery inside it. The Automaton Mystery rode a bicycle in a similarly spasmodic manner, signed its name on a blackboard, and took a bow before the astounded audience, whose views on Edwardian proto-robotics must have changed drastically as a result of this extraordinary show.

Mr Frederick Ireland, the transatlantic Frankenstein who claimed to have spent 10 years designing and building Enigmarelle, was well aware of the cynical attitude of the New York theatregoers. Before any person had time to shout out "Baloney! There is a dude inside that machine! Kick that walking scarecrow out of the theatre, mister, and give us our money back!" he went through an elaborate routine to persuade the audience that Enigmarelle really was an automaton. He removed the head, to reveal the electric lights inside. The back of the trunk was bristling with switches, handles and knobs, with which to control the automaton. The front of the chest opened on hinges, to reveals some rotating cogwheels. Both the arms and the legs could be detached, persuading many of the New Yorkers that they were really dealing with a particularly advanced kind of automaton. Frederick Ireland explained to the waiting journalists that Enigmarelle was purely mechanical, consisting of as many component parts as a 90 HP racing car, and costing nearly 10 times as much to build. There were seven motors inside the automaton, controlling various functions, and it consisted of 365 distinct and separate parts. In September 1904, Enigmarelle was at the Circle Theatre, situated at Broadway and 60th Street; in October, the automaton was performing at Chase's Theatre in Washington, where it is said to have attracted frenzied curiosity among the inhabitants of the American capital.

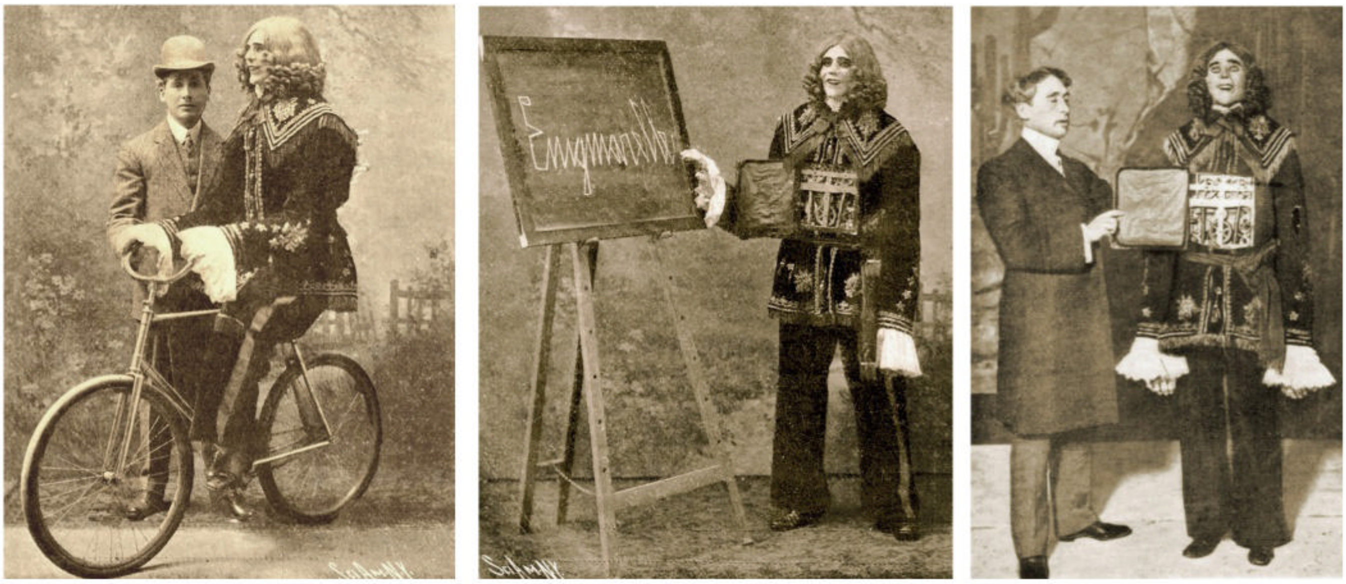

THE RAGE OF LONDON.
"ENIGMARELLE."
LONDON HIPPODROME.
PHOTO WAKEFIELD BRENTFORD



LEFT: An unposted card advertising Enigmarelle at the London Hippodrome. **BELOW LEFT**: Frederick Ireland and Enigmarelle attract a crowd during their 1905 Hippodrome stunt.

Having toured the Eastern Coast of the United States, Mr Ireland and Enigmarelle crossed the Atlantic in 1905. In early June, the transatlantic wonder automaton made its debut at the Hippodrome in London. Its onstage repertoire remained unchanged since its New York performances: the large automaton doll walked stiffly around on stage, rode a bicycle, and signed its name on a blackboard. The London journalists found it a most uncanny monster.

On 22 June, Enigmarelle walked from the Hippodrome to the Trocadero restaurant, to preside at a luncheon for specially invited journalists. This publicity stunt worked a treat, and gave Mr Ireland some



ABOVE LEFT & CENTRE: The 'Automaton Mystery' demonstrates its skills by riding a bicycle and writing its name on a blackboard. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Ireland reveals Enigmarelle's mechanical innards at Berlin's Zirkus Busch in 1906. **BELOW**: Alba Root, the legless cyclist, has been suggested as the man in the robot's body.

ideas for further promotional shenanigans in the Metropolis. On 3 July, Enigmarelle walked from the Hippodrome to a motor garage in Shaftesbury Avenue. An open automobile was boarded, and Enigmarelle took the wheel, driving it competently through the busy London traffic. Mr Ireland sat in the back, twiddling the knobs on the automaton's back in order to direct the robot chauffeur. Nothing even remotely like this stunt had ever been seen in London: a machine driving another machine! Between 6,000 and 7,000 Londoners congregated in Shaftesbury Avenue, and the busy traffic completely ground to a halt.

A complaint was made to the police, and Mr F Trussel and Mr H Garrick, the manager and publicist of the Hippodrome, were summoned before the Marlborough Street police court on 14 July to answer the charge of causing an obstruction. In court, Enigmarelle was referred to as "a dummy, said to be a steel man worked by electricity". Although the two defendants denied that Enigmarelle's outing in the motor-car had been intended as an advertisement, they were each fined 40 shillings, with 2 shillings costs. The defiant Frederick Ireland, who was also present in court, said that Enigmarelle would be driving a four-in-hand through the London streets next.

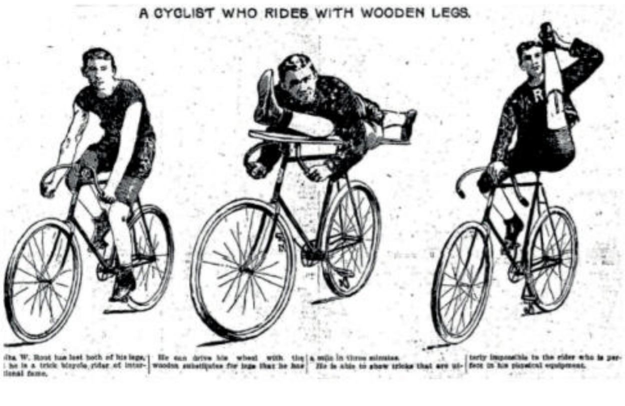
After two successful months at the London Hippodrome, Enigmarelle went on tour to Leeds and Nottingham in August, before returning to London and performing at the Holloway Theatre and the Grand Theatre in Clapham. In March 1906, Enigmarelle visited Italy, and later spent some time with Zirkus Busch in Berlin, before returning to the English provincial circuit, visiting the Preston Royal Hippodrome and the Ashton-under-Lyne Empire. In August 1907, Enigmarelle and Mr Ireland were in Paris, and in September the same year they were in Seattle.

It would appear that Enigmarelle's declining years in show business were spent in a dreary American hinterland of flyblown provincial theatres: in October 1913, the erstwhile wonder automaton was at the Topeka Orpheum, before going on to the Tulsa Majestic; its next and final engagement would be with the Theatre of Oblivion, in the City of Ended Hopes, to last in perpetuity. Perhaps some marauding Tulsa schoolboy, exploring a dusty attic in the 1920s, found a tall steel mannequin, with lightbulbs and cogwheels inside, silently rusting away in an atmosphere of long-standing neglect, only to be scared senseless when he saw that terrible head staring at him from a shelf, grinning inanely just as in its long-forgotten theatrical heyday …

It is remarkable that a writer in the *Scientific American* of January 1906 accepted Enigmarelle as a genuine automaton, but the scholarly acumen of the *Scientific American* has undergone a marked improvement since that time, as has the then-dormant science of robotics. Since it is recorded that Enigmarelle could sign its name on a blackboard, and even drive a motor-car, it is not possible that it was an automaton proper, thus validating the instinctive reaction of the New York theatre-going 'rubes' who first set eyes on Enigmarelle back in 1904: there must have been a 'dude' inside all along! It attracts suspicion that the contraption was so very tall, with plenty of room inside, and that the 'observation hatch' on the front of the chest was clearly double-bottomed, with some dodgy-looking cogwheels fitted as a disguise. And if the automaton had been genuine, why did its Frankenstein, the American showman Frederick Ireland, not allow any independent scientist to examine the monster he had constructed?

An anonymous Internet writer has claimed that the person manoeuvring Enigmarelle was his great-great-grandfather Alba W Root, alleging that this is proven by a number of theatrical contracts in his possession, signed by Root and Frederick Ireland. This hypothesis receives support from the fact that Alba Root definitely existed: it is recorded that after he had lost both his legs near the hips as a boy, from being run over by a railway train, he went on to become a trick cyclist, pedalling the machine with a pair of artificial legs. Now, what if Enigmarelle's detachable legs had fittings similar to Root's leg prostheses, enabling him to walk and ride a bicycle? Drawings of Root show him as a thin, agile man with good upper body strength: he might well have fitted inside Enigmarelle's capacious body, something that would hardly have been possible for a person with both legs intact.

Although as a general rule, anonymous Internet writers should not be relied upon, the 'Root hypothesis' explains some matters that would otherwise have been obscure, and provides a credible explanation for the great Enigmarelle hoax.



A CYCLIST WHO RIDES WITH WOODEN LEGS.

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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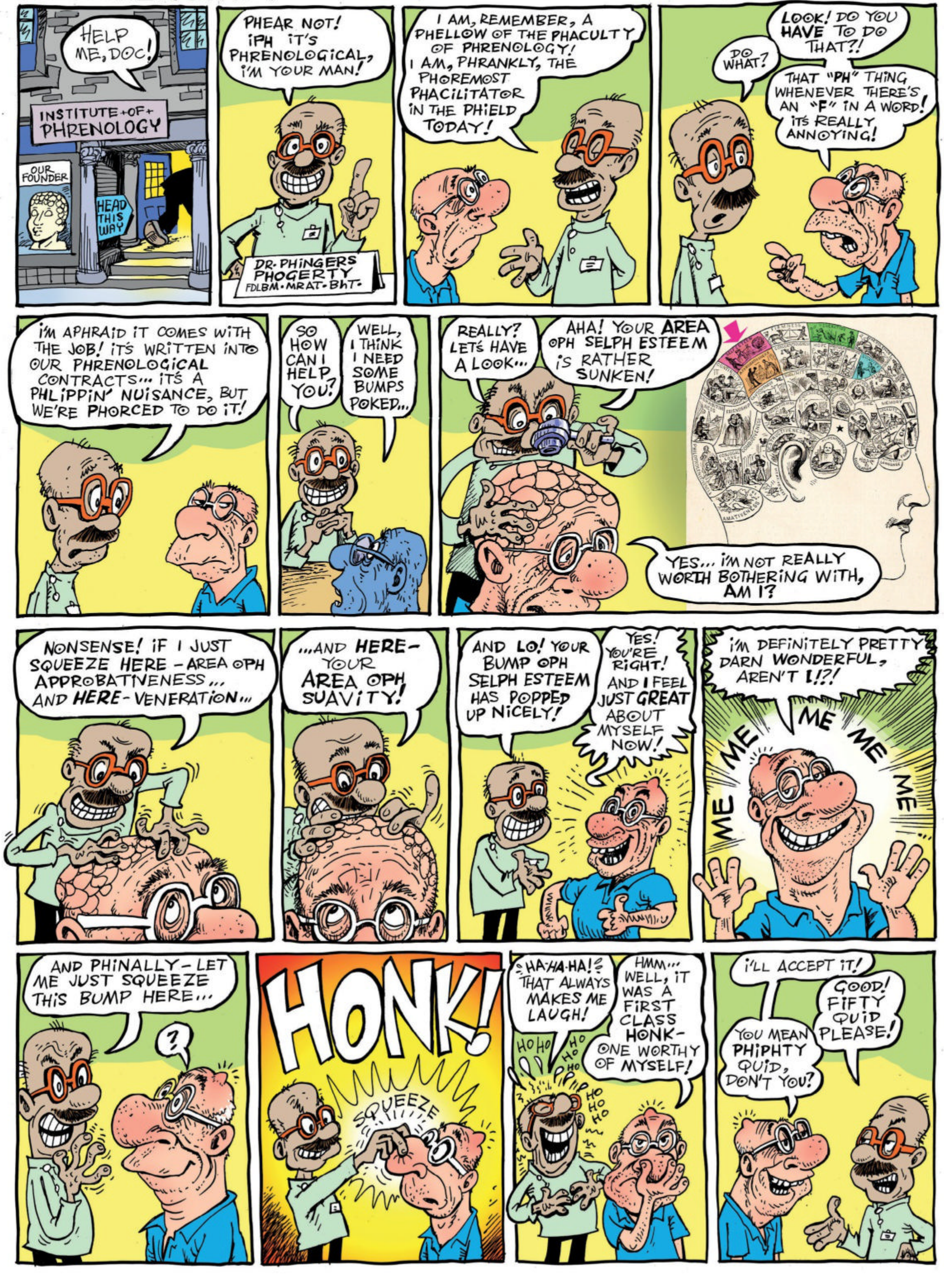
FENOMENOMIX

PHRENOLOGY

HUNT EMERSON


HELP ME, DOC!
INSTITUTE OF PHRENOLOGY
OUR FOUNDER
HEAD THIS WAY
PHEAR NOT! IPH IT'S PHRENOLOGICAL, I'M YOUR MAN!
DR. PHINGERS PHOGERTY FDLBM·MRAT·BhT·
I AM, REMEMBER, A PHELLOW OF THE PHACULTY OF PHRENOLOGY! I AM, PHRANKLY, THE PHOREMOST PHACILITATOR IN THE PHIELD TODAY!
LOOK! DO YOU HAVE TO DO THAT?!
DO WHAT?
THAT "PH" THING WHENEVER THERE'S AN "F" IN A WORD! IT'S REALLY ANNOYING!
I'M APHRAID IT COMES WITH THE JOB! IT'S WRITTEN INTO OUR PHRENOLOGICAL CONTRACTS... IT'S A PHLIPPIN' NUISANCE, BUT WE'RE PHORCED TO DO IT!
SO HOW CAN I HELP YOU?
WELL, I THINK I NEED SOME BUMPS POKED...
REALLY? LET'S HAVE A LOOK...
AHA! YOUR AREA OPH SELPH ESTEEM IS RATHER SUNKEN!
YES... I'M NOT REALLY WORTH BOTHERING WITH, AM I?
NONSENSE! IF I JUST SQUEEZE HERE - AREA OPH APPROBATIVENESS... AND HERE - VENERATION...
...AND HERE - YOUR AREA OPH SUAVITY!
AND LO! YOUR BUMP OPH SELPH ESTEEM HAS POPPED UP NICELY!
YES! YOU'RE RIGHT! AND I FEEL JUST GREAT ABOUT MYSELF NOW!
I'M DEFINITELY PRETTY DARN WONDERFUL, AREN'T I!?!
ME ME ME ME ME ME...
AND PHINALLY - LET ME JUST SQUEEZE THIS BUMP HERE...
?
HONK!
SQUEEZE
HA-HA-HA! THAT ALWAYS MAKES ME LAUGH!
HO HO HO HO HO
HMM... WELL, IT WAS A FIRST CLASS HONK - ONE WORTHY OF MYSELF!
HO HO HO
I'LL ACCEPT IT!
GOOD! FIFTY QUID PLEASE!
YOU MEAN PHIPHTY QUID, DON'T YOU?

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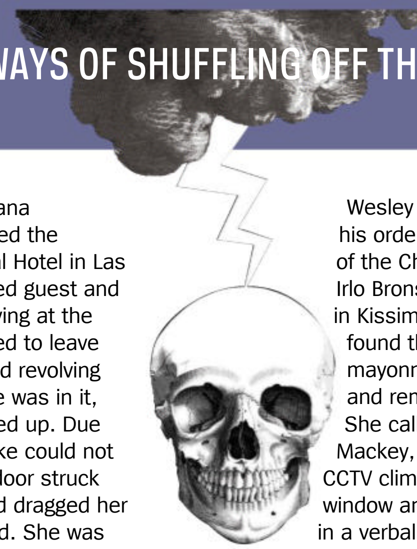
STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



In March 2023, Diana Truschke, 78, visited the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas as an "invited guest and patron". While staying at the hotel, Truschke tried to leave using its automated revolving door and when she was in it, it unexpectedly sped up. Due to her age, Truschke could not keep up, and the door struck her in the back and dragged her along at high speed. She was then "violently ejected" and thrown several feet, crashing face-first into the pavement outside the hotel. She survived the impact and received immediate medical attention, but she never fully recovered and died in October "due to complications from injuries". Her son is now suing the hotel for the relatively modest sum of $15,000 on the basis that hotel staff should have known the revolving door was malfunctioning and informed guests. *huffingtonpost.co.uk, 25 Mar 2025.*

The law finally caught up with Aurora Phelps in Mexico after she had spent years running what was described as a "romance scam on steroids" in both Mexico and Las Vegas, often with fatal results. Using a variety of names, including "Aurora Flores," "Aurora Flores-Velasco" and "Aurora-Alverez", Phelps had used online dating apps to prey on men and women in their 60s and 70s, gaining their confidence, then drugging them with dangerous doses of prescription sedatives or other controlled substances. Once they were sedated, Phelps stole their cars, looted their bank and brokerage accounts and used their credit cards to buy luxury goods and gold. One man targeted by Phelps had $3.3 million (£2.5 million) of his Apple stock liquidated by her while he spent five days in a coma. Another victim had been so thoroughly sedated that Phelps was able to kidnap him from Las Vegas, put him in a wheelchair and take him to a hotel across the Mexico border, where he later died. Two more of Phelps's catches were also found dead shortly after their encounter with her, while seven further victims of her scam have been identified, and it is believed there may be more. US authorities are now trying to extradite her from Mexico to face assorted fraud charges, as well as charges of identity theft and kidnapping, and she faces a maximum life sentence in prison if convicted. *reviewjournal.com, 23 Feb 2025.*

Wesley Robertson was collecting his order from the drive-thru window of the Checkers restaurant on West Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway in Kissimmee, Florida, when he found there were not enough mayonnaise packets with his order and remonstrated with the server. She called the manager, Elijah Mackey, 23, who can be seen on CCTV climbing out of the drive-thru window and becoming "engaged in a verbal dispute with Wesley Robertson regarding his food order". During this dispute it is claimed that Robertson made "a derogatory remark" to Mackey, who responded by pulling a handgun from his waistband and shooting Robertson in the chest. Mackey fled the scene, but was swiftly apprehended, while Robertson was rushed to hospital, where he died. Surprisingly, this is not the first mayonnaise-related homicide we have noted; in 2022 Melvyn Williams killed a worker in an Atlanta branch of Subway because his sandwich had too much mayo on it, and in 2021 Kristofer Erlbacher murdered Caleb Solberg for "jokingly" pouring mayo on his food in a bar. No other condiment seems to generate quite so much homicidal ire. *metro.co.uk, 27 May 2025.*

When Stephanie Menard, 73, and her husband Daniel, 79, went missing from their home in the Olive Dell Ranch, a residential RV park and nudist resort in Redlands, California, it prompted a lengthy police search. The Menards' remains were eventually found in bags in a concrete bunker beneath the nearby home of Michael Sparks, 62. Detained on suspicion of murder, Sparks allegedly confessed to another inmate that he had killed the Menards because they had offered him a hot dog, which he interpreted as an insult. In court, detective Thomas Williams explained that Sparks and the Menards had a decade-long feud started by a tree trimming dispute and that "Mr Sparks felt that the hot dog was a jab at him, making him feel like he was worth only a dollar hot dog, and that's what set him off that day". Triggered by the hot dog, Sparks attacked the couple with a rake, a hoe and a hammer and also reportedly drowned the Menards' dog, Cuddles, in a sink. "I didn't think he'd ever be able to do something like this," neighbour Tammie Wilkerson said. "I know he didn't like them, and he didn't have a problem telling people that, but I never thought he'd do this." *wcax.com, 19 Jun 2025.*

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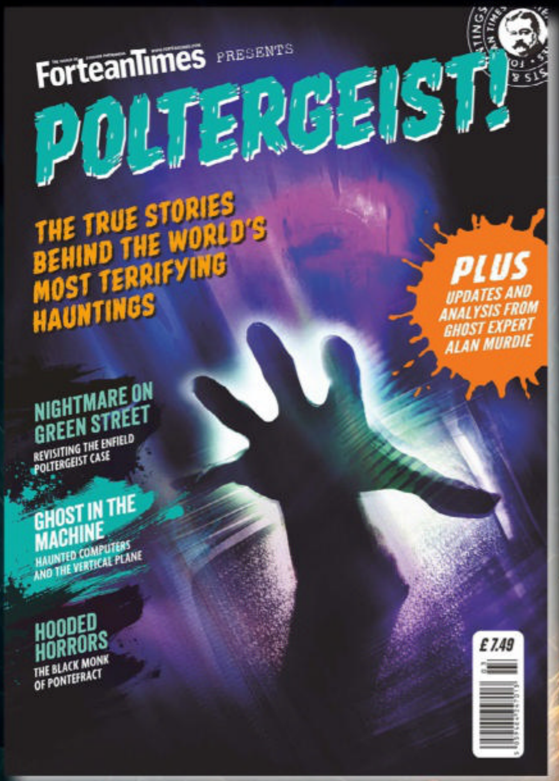
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